Thorns of Betrayal, Pain, Anguish and Loss Wrapping Around Our Hearts

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Thorns of Betrayal, Pain, Anguish and Loss Wrapping Around Our Hearts

by TheWitchofStJohns, UnknownMusing

Summary

After the events of "Kiss Me, Hold Me, Taste Me, Fuck Me," Hannibal has taken Abigail with him to Florence, Italy, leaving behind Will who has just woken up from a coma. And yet, he is not himself.

Pearl-Lace, his alter ego, has taken over.

Meanwhile in Florence, Hannibal finds himself attracting the attention of the mysterious Mr. Coquille who owns “The Firenze Masquerade Club” and whose true identity is unknown.

The Bee Died Upon Entering the Water

Chapter Summary

No I never knew him
The bees

The bees
They know everything

Be a person
Be a person again

- Dorothea Lasky, from *Become a Person*
(the title of this chapter is also from this poem)

(Nimue and Augustuv-Magnus Coquille by antenahenantenna on Twitter)

THREE DAYS AFTER WILL HAS WOKEN FROM HIS COMA

PEARL-LACE WILL'S P.O.V.

They say my name is "*Will Graham*" when a nurse and a doctor come into the hospital room to check up on me. They notice me frowning at them at the mention of the name.

“Who’s Will Graham?” I ask, voice coming out slightly feminine, but still masculine underneath. The nurse and doctor talk quietly among themselves, then the nurse approaches me, hesitant but gentle.

“Um…Honey, do you remember anything of what happened? Of the accident you were in?” she says, only to see another frown appear on my features at the words “*…accident you were in.”* She moves away to allow the doctor to check me over.

I turn my gaze to him, noting he has light hazel eyes. He reminds of someone – a face that appears in my mind’s eye, only to dissolve like ink in water before I can fully grasp its identity. The doctor walks away, whispering something to the nurse. She comes back over to me and with a gentle smile tells me that they’re going to give me something.

Something that will help calm me for now.

What happens next - I am not sure how it happens, only that it does. I forget everything afterwards.

I look down and see blood dripping from my hands.

Secrets, Sorrows, and the Con

Chapter Summary

Mysterious man
Where have you gone;
What is your story, really;
Your allegiances, your faith?

Hidden away from view
Behind smoke and the mask
You wear, hiding
Secrets, sorrows, and the con
Beneath the crooked smile
And stifled guffaw

- Raymond A. Foss, *Mysterious Man*

Chapter Notes

We are imagining Lars Mikkelsen as Mr. Coquille. We know this is wrong on so many levels, but just remember: He only looks and sounds like Lars.

LOCATION - FLORENCE, ITALY

HANNIBAL AND ABIGAIL'S APARTMENT

DAWN

HANNIBAL'S P.O.V.

Sitting on the outdoor balcony balustrade, unable to sleep, I calmly sketch the view of the sun rising over the tall, beautiful, red and dusty yellow bricked houses of Florentine architecture. I had found sleep eluding me in my large, luxurious but mostly empty bed without someone else beside me to hold and with whom to greet the morning.

I missed Will deeply, and yet felt somewhat betrayed by him for keeping his identity as ***Pearl-Lace*** a secret from me. I recalled my last sight of him, flung backwards by Jack's

bullet hitting him the shoulder, forcing him to drop the knife he had intended for Alana.

I finish sketching and lower the pencil, pursing my lime-green lipstick-covered lips as I think about the other problem that had arisen shortly after my arrival in Florence with Abigail.

Mr. Coquille – a tall man with slicked back ash blonde hair and pince-nez glasses - had rescued me when I had nearly been pushed off the platform by some transphobic young men who had spied me in my "*Nimue*" persona.

He caught me just in time, amid screams of shock and horror from passing travelers. I found myself gripping his suit sleeve tightly, my heart furiously pounding against my rib cage as if it sought escape. I faintly heard him introduce himself, mentioning that he owned a club on the other side of town.

"Hannibal?" I hear Abigail's voice. I turn to look at the somber young girl who has become like a daughter to me. She is wearing a simple flowery dress with a black woolly jumper over it. She looks delightful, but her face is shaded with sadness. I smile softly at her.

"Yes? Is something wrong?" I ask her. She walks over to me and looks down at the sketching I've just done. I reach up to cup her cheek lightly and stroke the delicate cheekbone with my thumb, wiping away the remnants of a tear trail.

"Umm…there is a letter for you. I left it on your writing desk," she replies, slipping away from me and keeping her head lowered to avoid my gaze.

"Did it say who it is from?" I ask. She shakes her head and turns to go back inside. I sit for another moment, wishing I could ease whatever is troubling her fragile mind.

The letter is just where she had said. Picking it up, I see on the back of the envelope the initials of what translates to "***The Firenze Masquerade Club"***. Slitting it open with a penknife, I slip out the enclosed card.

It is an invitation to the club (from its gracious and charming owner, Mr. Coquille) to attend a celebration there this coming Saturday. I bring the card up to my lips, tapping it against them lightly, and begin to ponder.

Who was this man – Mr. Coquille?

Why was he interested in me? What had attracted him to me?

Did he know who I really was?

Did he somehow know about the ***tableaux*** *I had presented here in my youth?*

I slip the invitation card back into the envelope, placing it in the writing desk drawer to examine in greater detail later. At this particular moment, I need to prepare for work at the Palazzo Capponi – where I am now the curator. Securing this dream job was a simple matter.

All it required was deposing the former curator, Mr. Erico Bergucci, via a few seconds' work and a modest outlay of two bags of cement.

I recalled fondly the Bella Arti Committee ballroom soirée, where, under the scrutiny of Professor Sogliato, I recited the poem "*La Vita Nuova*" by Dante. Reluctantly impressed, he then informed me that he wished me to be tested by the *Studiolo* , to determine whether or not I was qualified to lecture on Dante. Named for the ornate private study in the Ducal Palace in Gubbio, the Studiolo is a small but fierce group of scholars who have unashamedly (and with great pleasure, I understand) ruined a number of academic reputations. They met often in the Palazzo Vecchio.

LOCATION - FLORENCE, ITALY

THE PALAZZO CAPPONI LIBRARY

MID MORNING

HANNIBAL'S P.O.V.

Sunlight streams through the large windows of the Palazzo Capponi and fills my work space as I step through the tall double doors. I approach the sixteenth century refectory table I use to examine the many documents the Capponi Library needs to be updated, revised and/or translated.

Nimue – my alter-ego – has taken over again. Deep down, however, I couldn't deny that I enjoyed embracing this new side of me. I circle the large table and place my satchel down, unclasping it and sliding out the documents I had been working on. I had finally finished them late at night at the Florentine apartment I shared with Abigail.

For today Nimue has chosen black lipstick embedded with flakes of gold, curved golden claw earrings, and a simple crème suit. I am busy going through the documents once more, catching any possible mistakes, when footsteps echoing off the polished floor make me raise my head to see Mr. Coquille.

He stops before me and stands there with his coat over his arm, looking at me calmly.

"Mr. Coquille. This is...unexpected. What brings you to the Palazzo Capponi?"

"You."

“ *You.”*

Satisfied the documents I had been perusing are free of errors, I place them down with a faint look of surprise at Mr. Coquille. He comes round the large table to stand next to me, while I reach for the documents that need to be translated.

I feel him move some strands of hair that have gotten into my eyes, gently tucking them behind my ear. Slightly flustered, I turn my head to look at him and say “*I need to get on with my work*” when his lips suddenly cover mine in a chaste kiss. As he pulls away, I can see gold flakes attached to his top lip and I cannot help but smile.

Perhaps he mistakes that smile as some kind of approval, for he leans forwards again, kissing me more boldly. I move my hands up to his chest to push him away, only to rest them there. He gently pulls me up and out of my chair and presses me up against the long edge of the table, changing position each time to deepen the kiss.

I don’t know what to do. All the thoughts in my head, even those concerning my dear Will, are being overwritten. He grips both my cheeks in his hands, kissing me more heavily, devouring my lips. A weak whimper escapes me as I shakily attempt to turn my face away, only for him to pull me back into the kiss.

His mouth is hot and wet. I feel him flick his tongue over my lips, begging admittance. Trembling heavily, I manage to pull away when I hear voices coming from the hallway. One I recognize as Prof. Sogliato.

“You need to leave,” I tell Mr. Coquille, quite firmly. When I attempt to pull away, he grabs my hand and bends down, slowly licking my wrist. I tremble with the heat of it.

He raises his eyes, observing me trying to control myself and failing. A faint smile ghosts across his lips as he turns and walks toward the bookshelf on the other side of the room. He spares a mild glance at Prof. Sogliato, who spears him with an irritated glare in return. The professor then approaches me, hands behind his back.

"I do hope you won't be making a habit of becoming so... distracted during your working hours, Signor Fell," Prof. Sogliato says to me. I turn around and attempt to sort the documents on my desk while quelling the urge to stab the ornate feather pen into the side of his temporal lobe. "Who is he?"

"Mr. Coquille was just passing through. He...helped me during an accident," I reply. He looks over at the man behind him, now hovering near the large bookshelf as though waiting for me.

"See that his time here is limited," snaps the professor. He turns and stalks out of the room, shooting another glare at Mr. Coquille. After several more seconds of smirking knowingly in my direction, Mr. Coquille breezes out of the room himself. I am left standing there gazing at the empty air, frustrated and worried.

Sharp Roses

Chapter Summary

They bruise their pupils with the sharp roses.
They built an empire with fur and sequins.
And lived with poise and jealousy.
Burnt and alive, torn yet together.
The prudent of all, dangerous of all minds.

Survive, said the father
Believe, said the Jesus

- Miss Saitwal, *A sequin murderous soul*

This chapter starts with Hannibal's P.O.V., continued from the previous chapter.

CW: Homophobic language, graphic violence, and Mr. Coquille not knowing the meaning of the word "consent."

LOCATION - FLORENCE, ITALY

THE PALAZZO CAPPONI

MID AFTERNOON

HANNIBAL'S P.O.V.

After finishing my work on the documents, I head down the flight of polished marble stairs. I desire nothing more than to return to my own apartment and avoid the sinister Mr. Coquille.

I don't trust him. There is something about his aura that sends shivers down my spine.

Reaching the bottom of the flight of stairs, I walk into the large courtyard. I pass beneath the stone arches spreading above me, and the Corinthian pillars with frond-like filigrees carved at the top.

The sunlight is streaming down into the open courtyard, filling it with soft-toned golden light. I can hear voices as I round a corner, and see Anthony Dimmond speaking to a companion.

He gives a sigh, ruffling a hand through his hair. He bids farewell to his friend and moves to head off. He stops when he notices me standing near the *pyrus salicifolia* (also known as the weeping pear tree) that line the walk. He comes over to me.

My heart rate speeds up slightly and a light blush rises on my cheeks as I find myself tucking a strand of hair behind my ear in a coquettish way.

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LOCATION - BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

DRUID HILL PARK

EARLY AFTERNOON

PEARL-LACE/WILL'S P.O.V.

Crimson petals.

The blood of my victims stains my hands completely. I am unaware of what happened, only that it felt strange and euphoric experiencing the deaths of the fake nurse and doctor - who were actually aspiring killers who considered themselves superior to the people "below them."

They had no idea. The ***Predator*** in me had laughed at their demise as they begged me - the supposed innocent ***Prey*** , they naively believed - with tearful eyes and pleading down on their knees to let them go.

The barking of dogs makes me lift my head up to see, close to an old hunting cabin, a woman with long hair which hangs down her back.

There is something about her that reminds me of... Whatever it is is snatched away before I can latch onto it.

Do I know her?

Who is this woman?

These thoughts swirl around my mind without answers. I want answers.

"WINSTON!!"

The strange woman shouting the name of a golden retriever startles me out of my reverie. The dog approaches me, snuffling and whining heavily as he paws at me, trying to make me recognize him.

"Winston, what are you doi....*Will!?*"

Her voice. As soon as I hear the shock, horror and surprise in the strange woman's voice, a faint memory, blurred like an old film on a reel, appears before my eyes.

A shot ringing out.

Pain shooting through one's shoulder, followed by crimson spurting upwards to cover the face of a man with maroon eyes.

A knife falling to the floor with a dull clink on a polished kitchen floor.

Blood dripping on a carpet. Labored breathing and one's heart thudding against one's rib cage.

I come out of the fractured memory trembling greatly. I begin to look around the snowy landscape, feeling nothing more than the desire to get out of here, now.

Then I remember..... the Chesapeake Ripper, his voice telling me to search for him.

I want him here.

Holding me to anchor me. Without him, everything seems lifeless and empty.

Shivering slightly, I wrap my arms around myself and feel Winston - the golden retriever - nudge against me, as if to reassure me everything is all right. The strange woman steps hesitantly towards me.

I step backwards. There is something about her that makes one of the stitched wounds on my lower torso twinge with a faint remainder of a knife stabbing into my body.

But had she been holding it? Or had it been the man with the maroon eyes?

I can't tell, the memories are too hazy and fractured. I have yet to understand what the fake nurse had meant by " *the accident"* , as they had called it.

But had it been an accident?

What had triggered it?

What had set the chain of events in motion?

LOCATION - FLORENCE, ITALY

THE PALAZZO CAPPONI

MID AFTERNOON

HANNIBAL'S P.O.V.

"Nimue!!? I didn't expect to see you here of all places."

Anthony Dimmond - wearing a fine but threadbare suit and a knitted scarf around his neck - steps close to me with a smile as I take his arm and walk him away from the complex of the ***Palazzo Capponi.***

"Yes. Well...I was looking for Mr. Fell. It seems he is not around at the moment," I say. He turns me suddenly into a dead end, where there is a bench with two sakura blossoms trees curving over it to make a small enclosed canopy.

He accompanies me to the bench, brushing away the soft, delicate petals before we sit down.

I open my mouth to say something, but the gentle brush of his lips against mine stops me. He slips an arm around me to draw me closer to him.

His kisses are light and gentle. His head tilts slightly this way and that as the kisses deepen. He leans back slightly to look at me, a curious but fond gaze. I am quickly pulled back into another kiss. Pressing myself against him, I caress the nape of his neck. I can feel his tongue as it seeks admittance between my lips.

I open my mouth, and it feels like wicked tongues of flames are licking at me, heating me up from the inside out. I suddenly and shamelessly find myself straddling his lap. If anyone can see us, I do not care.

Our tongues entwine, dancing in erotic harmony as electric sensation courses through our veins.

I am grinding my hips down into the now very evident bulge in his suit trousers. I moan and gasp softly when he grinds upwards in answer.

I am so close. I know that anything else he does will bring it closer.

I am so close. The tingling pressure is building to a climax within my body, and I am helpless to stop it.

I am so close.

LOCATION - FLORENCE, ITALY

HANNIBAL AND ABIGAIL'S APARTMENT

LATE AFTERNOON

HANNIBAL'S P.O.V.

Afterwards, I exchange phone numbers with Anthony and with a kiss, I take my leave of him. I walk back to my apartment, slightly dazed but happy, and up the winding flight of stairs to the top landing and our front door. Retrieving my key, I slip it into the lock and push the door open, revealing the darkened hallway.

I remove the key, step into the hallway and move to close the door behind me when something or someone slams into me. I quickly twist in their grip, but not quick enough. I am slammed down to the floor, knocking the breath out of my lungs with such force it winds me.

They lean over me, covering me with their shadow while checking my pulse with two fingers. Satisfied, I am hauled off the floor and dragged down the hallway by the collar of my suit into the sitting room. I am harshly thrown onto the ornate sofa, where after nearly sailing over the back, I land on the pillows with a thud. While acting more disoriented than I actually am, I surreptitiously slip one hand down behind one of the pillows and reach for the scalpel hidden there.

Momentarily I hear footsteps approaching. Continuing to feign exhaustion, I keep my head down and wait for the right moment. When it comes, my head snaps up with a snarl and my arm flashes out, slashing across their throat with the scalpel. I watching a thin line appear on the skin, followed by crimson slightly spurting outwards.

I had missed the main artery because they had managed to step backwards just in the nick of time. I get up and stalk towards them, watching them stumble and collapse on the floor next to a round table with a vase on it, filled with flowers. One can never predict what will catch one's attention in times like these. They are holding their throat with one hand to staunch the bleeding, gasping for breath and regarding me with hate-filled eyes.

"Who... sent... you?" I hiss at them, gripping the scalpel tightly. They dare to spit at my feet, getting a goodly amount of their disgusting saliva on one of my Italian patent leather shoes. I ignore it - for now.

"Filthy....faggot.....all high and mighty with that look you wear. You....just can't help it, can you? Disgusting faggot bitch," they sneer at me. I grab them, haul them up and fling them onto the sofa. They manage to pull a handkerchief from their trouser pocket and hold it to the wound, glaring at me all the while.

"Do you speak to your wife with that tongue?" I ask. For the second time today I straddle a man's lap, but this time is much less pleasant than the last. They clench their right fist, resting on the armrest, and make an aborted attempt to punch me. I click my tongue at them, placing the scalpel against the hollow of their throat as a warning.

"You..fucking....psychopath...GET THE HELL OFF ME!!" they shout, but I place my finger to their lips to shush them.

"*Shh, now. We don't want to wake the neighbors, do we?*" I whisper. I slip one hand down, feeling ***Nimue*** within me rise to the surface, and cup the very evident bulge in their suit trousers. "And, in addition....you are aroused by me."

"You're lying!! Don't be...stupid, I'm not attracted to....disgusting filthy people like you," they protest, pushing me forcefully off their lap. I land softly on the carpet and look pointedly at their groin area with a smirk.

They look down as well, only to look back up, shocked and horrified at the tent that has formed in their suit trousers. Getting onto my hands and knees, I crawl toward them on all fours until I reach their thighs. I place my elegant, manicured hands on them and gently push them apart, still smirking. I arch up slightly between their thighs until our faces are so close I can see a bead of sweat begin its slow trickle down their forehead.

"Hmm, well....have you heard of....***Il Mostro di Firenze*** , perhaps?" I ask coquettishly, watching their eyes widen in fear. I lunge forwards, grabbing the thick offending muscle in their mouth with my teeth, ripping it out hard. I hear a choked, guttural scream of shock, horror and pain.

I rise and step away, panting slightly. I watch them start to choke on the blood filling their mouth and gushing down the sides of their face, their hands twitching uncontrollably. White froth from their mouth mixes with the blood, the whole mess starting to drip down the front of their suit. Their eyes begin to roll up to the back of their head. Their body gives a final jerk and goes still.

Taking a handkerchief out of my breast pocket, I place the tongue into it and fold the fabric around it. I lean against the round table momentarily for support. Placing the wrapped tongue onto the table, I take off my suit jacket, roll up my shirt sleeves and approach the body.

It has been a while since I have had...such good ***meat*** appear at my doorstep.

Abigail is not yet back from her classes at the university. I pause while preparing dinner for the both of us - *Crisp Lemon Calf Liver* and *Parmesan Crumbled Lamb Brains*. As I look out the kitchen window, I see the sun setting over the buildings of Florence, turning the sky above brilliant shades of soft lilac, gentle-toned yellow and fiery orange.

I walk around the small kitchen island and approach the half-moon-shaped window. I lift one hand up into the moonlight that streams down into the dimly lit kitchen. I step close to the window and rest my forehead against the cool pane of glass with a sigh.

"***Pearl-Lace****...where are you...****mano meilė***?" I whisper in the silence of the kitchen.

I close my eyes and see Will lying in his hospital bed, still sleeping, looking so small and lost and alone. My eyes had been wet when I turned at last and silently left him behind.

Why hadn't I taken him with me?

There had been nothing to stop me. I could have easily brought him here to be with Abigail and I, if she had wanted him here.

She has been acting oddly ever since we arrived in Florence. Something is eating away at her. She refuses to tell me what it is; any attempt to coax it out of her always ends with her turning from me with downcast eyes and fleeing to another room.

The sounds of a key turning in the lock and the front door opening drag me out of the memory. I do my best to pull myself together. I walk out of the kitchen, through the sitting room, and into the hallway. Abigail is standing there, but she is not alone. My hackles rise as I see who is with her. The one person who makes my ***Inner Predator*** come awake on high alert.

Mr. Coquille.

He is saying something to her. His gaze soon turns straight toward me, however, and it is enough to send me quickly back to the kitchen. I have to lean against the island for support, feeling myself grip the stone edges tightly as my chest heaves in anger.

How dare he?

How dare this....unknown man attempt to influence the young orphan I had taken in after the death of her parents? Will had shot her father, Garret Jacob Hobbs - "The Minnesota Shrike" - sending him flying against the cupboards in that tiny kitchen, his blood splattering onto Will's face. Abigail lay on the floor, her throat slit by her father. She was nearly drowning in her own blood, Will begging me with his eyes to save her. It was at that moment that I knew Will Graham had to be mine.

I wanted him. Wanted Will to be my equal, and... ***my lover.***

Asking Mr. Agustuv-Magnus Coquille to stay for dinner is most certainly not my intention. But dear Abigail insists, telling me he is one of her college lecturers, teaching Historical Art and Latin. And hearing that she has enthusiastically praised my cooking skills ("My dad is such an amazing chef! You will love it!") is a definite stroke to my ego. I allow him to stay.

After a very satisfying meal, Abigail excuses herself to bed ("Big exam tomorrow!"), leaving me alone with Agustuv-Magnus. I clear away the dishes from the dining room table and head to the kitchen to place them in the soapy water of the wash basin. I start washing the fine china plates quietly as he comes in to stand next to me.

He brings his nearly finished glass of ruby red wine to his lips to inhale its scent, a gesture I can't help but feel is slightly affected. He knocks back the remainder of the wine and places

the glass on the polished counter. He wanders slowly out of my field of vision, then I suddenly feel the back of a knuckle stroking down my spine. My back arches slightly at the unexpected touch.

I try to ignore my growing unease as I continue to wash and dry the dishes. I come to the cutlery at the same time his hands touch my sides. I stiffen heavily, gripping a knife under the soapy water. He slides them further down to take hold of my hips, pulling me suddenly back against him. The knife is jolted out of my hand.

If he ever noticed that I was holding a knife in my hand, the fool shows no sign of it. He starts to grind his hips into me from behind in a way that feels like he is... actually penetrating me. My hands shoot out of the water and grip the sink edge for support. I would have collapsed if he were not holding me up.

Gasping in anger, I manage to wrench free. I walk away unsteadily to catch my breath, putting as much distance between us as I can manage. It is as if he is taking up all the oxygen in the room and snuffing it out so there isn't any left to breathe.

"Get...away from me. Don't ever....come near me again. Or my daughter," I snarl at him, panting. He marches up to me and slaps me hard across the cheek, splitting my bottom lip and drawing blood.

He grabs my chin. Fine, manicured nails dig harshly into my cheek, drawing beads of blood. He places his free hand on my hip and yanks me flush against his chest. I glare at him, but I see no emotion in those dead eyes. Only harsh, unforgiving coldness.

A smirk plays across his thin lips. Turning my face by my chin, he leans close and licks the drops of blood from my cheek, then places his lips against my ear. His voice is like the hiss of a snake. Where is my Mongoose?

"With one snap of my fingers, I can easily get rid of your ... *daughter*...by arranging some kind of...***accident.*** Or, you could agree to my terms right now." Twisting out of his grip, I reach quickly for a sharp knife from the knife block.

"Not happening!" I growl. I bend low to sweep his legs out from under him when a knee slams into my jaw with a force that leaves my teeth rattling. I fall backwards, weakly coughing up blood that splatters onto the polished kitchen floor.

He nearly shattered my jaw by doing what had just did. He will regret that. I bring up a hand and wipe my mouth, smearing the gold-flaked black lipstick with the blood, creating a manic, macabre grimace.

"Harm her and I'll tear you apart. I don't care if I'm caught doing it," I hear myself snarling in ***Nimue's*** voice.

Without warning, a bottle of expensive wine slams into the side of my head.

I stumble to one side, falling against the wall and sliding down to the floor. I can feel blood lightly trickling down the side of my temple. He lowers the half-smashed wine bottle, placing

it on the kitchen island.

"Such a sad waste of fine vintage wine," Agustuv-Magnus Coquille muses. He ignores me lying against the wall, still tightly gripping the knife. Using the wall for support, I manage to get to my feet.

This man, who I know nothing about, is decidedly mad, bad, and dangerous to know. I lunge at him, still in a bit of a daze, only for him to grab my wrist and twist my arm behind my back. I cry out harshly at the wrenching pain as he tightens his grip, forcing me to release the knife. It clatters to the floor.

He presses himself against me and grabs me tight around the throat with his free hand, effectively cutting off my oxygen supply. My vision begins to dim, going in and out of focus. He squeezes tighter against the pressure points in my neck.

My eyes flutter rapidly, darkness sweeping in like raven's wings. I go limp in his grasp, sinking down as my eyes finally slip shut. My last thoughts before losing consciousness are of Abigail... and Will. I remember nothing thereafter.

My Painful Den of Sorrows

Chapter Summary

> Welcome to my torture room,
> my painful den of sorrows.
> Although today you are alive,
> I can promise no tomorrow.
>
> - Ken Bennight, *Torture Room*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

LOCATION - BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

ALANA BLOOM'S HOME

LATE AFTERNOON

PEARL-LACE/WILL'S P.O.V.

"*Here... drink this."*

I'm handed a warm mug of something sweet and hot by the strange woman called...Alana Bloom....while I sit in the living room of her home, wearing some fresh new clothes she had bought for me.

She had been reluctant at first to buy me feminine clothes. Yet here I am sitting in her armchair wearing a black off-the-shoulder top, white jeans with a rose pattern stenciled onto them, and feathery earrings with little white teardrops attached to them in my ears .

Bringing the mug to my lips, I take a sip of the warm tea with honey, feeling it soothe me for now. And yet, every cell in my body yearns to leave to find the ***Chesapeake Ripper***.

"I need a favor. Can you....explain to me what is *this accident* I had, that the nurse at the hospital mentioned to me?" I ask Alana. She nearly drops her own teacup at those words. She takes a deep breath and walks over to the armchair across from me.

"What do you remember? Anything?" she asks as she sits, curious about my answer. Holding the warm mug with both hands, she crosses one leg over the other, her eyes keen yet apprehensive.

"Just fragments, which are like...shards of glass tinkling all around me and I can't put them back together again," I reply, circling the rim of the mug with a lacquered blue and lime green nail. I can't help but notice how she seems to be edgy and nervous in my presence.

What is frightening her?

"Oh....I see. Is there anything else you need?" she asks, avoiding my question. I place the mug down on the little table next to the armchair. I see there a vase filled with flowers - sweet smelling buddleia, honeysuckle and heather. I reach out and gently brush some of the blossoms with my fingertips.

The delicate umbels of the tiny flowers bunched together look so fragile, easily broken. I softly pick one of the flowers from the vase, then stand and walk to the window to sit on the window ledge. I can feel Alana's eyes follow me.

A gentle breeze is blowing through the open window, making the light yellow and orange curtains billow back and forth like sails in the wind. I slowly pick the little flowers from the stem and allow them to be wafted out of my hand into the soft breeze.

LOCATION - FLORENCE, ITALY

EXACT LOCATION UNKNOWN

EVENING

HANNIBAL'S P.O.V.

"*Ein Mannlein steht im Walde ganz still und stumm, Es hat von lauter Purpur ein Mantlein um....*"

A whisper of a nursery rhyme I had once sung to Mischa when she had been alive makes me snap my eyes open, revealing Augustuv-Magnus Coquille sitting in a high-backed dark green leather armchair with oak arm rests. His gaze behind the pince-nez is cold and calculating, and focused entirely on me. He is idly tapping a long light sabre-style device that glows a faint neon purple against the side of the chair.

I try to move, only to gasp and wince at the agony that shoots through my entire body, radiating from my shoulders, neck and spine.

As I become more fully conscious, I realize that my arms are stretched above my head, and I am chained to the ceiling of an unknown room by leather cuffs attached to my wrists. My feet barely touch the floor, and save for my black silk lace knickers, I am naked. My neck, torso and groin are encircled and bound in rope, in the style of Japanese rope bondage or *shibari*.

"Where is Abigail?" I manage to croak, my breath ragged and my glare murderous. "I will skin you alive if you have harmed her."

Coquille rises languidly from his chair and strolls over to me, tapping the long glass tube against his thigh. "Ah, you're awake," he drawls. "Have no fear, she is still sound asleep in her bed in your apartment, just as we left her. This little matter is between you and I." A switch is flipped somewhere on his person, and the device glows a deeper purple. He waves it before my face. "Are you familiar with the violet wand?"

I have heard of it, and I know what it does. I remain silent, merely nodding once. The murderous glare, however, remains.

"Ah. Well, this little beauty is going to accompany and enhance our conversation this evening. Also, you may be be interested to learn that this," he swirls the wand slowly around me, "all of it, is specially constructed, electrically conductive rope." He brings the wand closer to a portion of rope around my chest, looking at me as if daring me to stop him. My heart is beginning to race, but whether from fear or anticipation is difficult to tell. I hold his gaze as he very gently strokes the wand against the rope. A shock pulses through my chest and travels up my arms, making them jerk as I cry out. Coquille turns away with a chuckle. "Oh yes, this is going to be a *very* interesting conversation!"

"What do you want, Coquille?" My breath is steadying and my voice is becoming stronger, now that I know what I am up against. "What is all this nonsense about? Who are you?"

I cannot see him now for he has walked behind me, and it is too painful for me to turn my neck. I can hear a hum as if he is considering a thought. "Do you recall a man from your youth? A man by the name of... Vladimir Grutas?" I hear the crackle of the wand as it travels the rope down my back. I am not sure what makes me jerk and writhe more - the shock, or the mention of *that man's name*.

"Yes. Yes, I do," I pant. Another hum from Coquille as he slowly walks around in front of me again. "How do you... what is this?" I am sweating now as the wand hovers close to the ropes down and across my abdomen. He brings his eyes to mine, and I am starting to see an ember of anger in them.

"And do you recall what took place between Grutas and yourself? And why?" The wand meets the ropes at last, Coquille pressing in harder this time. The pain is almost unbearable, causing my body to sag against the restraints. My arms feel as though they may separate from my shoulders. Sweating, grimacing and twitching, I meet Coquille's gaze once more. The hardness of it is infuriating and...fascinating. My voice rough, I tell him exactly what he wants to hear. I mince no words.

"I seduced him, I killed him and I ate him. He was one of the men who killed my... my sister Mischa. He forced... he forced me to eat her flesh. I figured... it was the least he deserved." In spite of the pain, or perhaps encouraged by it, my mouth cannot help but turn up in a crooked teeth-baring smile. It was, indeed, the very least the pig had coming to him.

Coquille is silent as a stone. His gaze is still nothing but cold anger. After a moment he seems to remember himself, shaking his head as if to clear it. He begins to tap the wand here and there on the ropes in a seemingly casual manner, looking down his nose as I twitch and jerk. The taps send shocks of varying degrees all over that, I confess, I am beginning to enjoy. While doing this he asks, "Do you perhaps also recall a young man on the premises, about your age, a little older perhaps? Thin, blonde hair, glasses? He saw you leading Grutas off to that empty field, promising him - well, God knows what. Do you remember seeing him?"

The combination of the memory of killing Grutas, the shocks from the wand, and Coquille's silky voice are proving to be too much for my overloaded nervous system. I hang my head down and close my eyes in an attempt to lessen the sensations. When I open my eyes again, I see my cock erect and hard, straining against the black lace panties. I raise my head and meet Coquille's glare with no shame. "I vaguely remember, yes. I didn't get a good look at him, my mind was elsewhere. Who... who was he?" My voice catches as I begin to realize where this is going. Is it true? Can it be true?

With a grimace, Coquille increases the power on the wand, kneels down and stares at the hard outline of my cock inside the panties. "The young man was I, Dr. Lecter." The wand hits the rope over my cock and I convulse with a roar. When I raise my head again, I catch a glimpse of Coquille rolling the wand with both hands up and down over my aching, twitching cock, pressing in hard. My addled mind imagines him rolling out pastry dough with a rolling pin.

My entire body is bathed in sweat. There are more convulsions, more exclamations of pain and rage (and yes, I admit, a tiny bit of pleasure). Black spots begin to dance before my eyes. Just before I lose consciousness, Coquille looks up at me.

"You see, Dr. Lecter, Vladimir Grutas was my father."

I am beginning to regain consciousness, my vision dark, my limbs sluggish. My entire body aches, but I realize I am no longer chained to the ceiling. As the fog clears from my brain, I find I am lying on my back in a large, luxurious bed. I still cannot see anything, even though my eyes are open. I move my head around slightly, wincing with the pain, and feel some kind of cloth tied over my eyes and behind my head. My arms are at my side, but when I try to lift them, I find they are tied by my wrists on both sides to something that is holding them down. The mattress dips as someone lies down, close to my side. A hand softly strokes my hair and my cheek, and I hear a silky, snaky voice that makes my stomach drop in disgust and dread.

"Ahh, there you are, my dear. You have returned to me. You are so lovely, my darling Nimue. So very lovely. I am the luckiest man in the world, do you know that? You are soon to be mine, precious one. *All mine.*"

Chapter End Notes

Translation of the nursery rhyme according to Google Translate: "A man stands quite still and silent in the forest, he wears a mantle of pure purple...."

The Spinner of the Years

Chapter Summary

VIII
And as the smart ship grew
In stature, grace, and hue,
In shadowy silent distance grew the Iceberg too.

IX
Alien they seemed to be;
No mortal eye could see
The intimate welding of their later history,

X
Or sign that they were bent
By paths coincident
On being anon twin halves of one august event,

XI
Till the Spinner of the Years
Said "Now!" And each one hears,
And consummation comes, and jars two hemispheres.

- Thomas Hardy, from *The Convergence of the Twain*

CW: Sex scene with Will/Mason Verger, Sorry, folks.

LOCATION - IN THE AIR ABOVE BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

MASON VERGER'S PRIVATE JET

EARLY AFTERNOON

PEARL-LACE/WILL'S P.O.V.

Watching the runway of the Baltimore airport slowly recede as the large private charter jet leaves it behind, I turn my gaze away from the window to look at Alana's friend Margot Verger sitting across from me. Her brother Mason sits across from her, plotting his next move

as they play Battleship. We are on our way to Florence, Italy. Alana is napping nearby in her seat; Margot throws an occasional affectionate glance her way.

Mason Verger is a vile sticky-up little man. It is obvious to me just from the way he acts around people, and especially from the hateful way he treats Margot. Winston, sadly, is in a crate in the hold below, as animals are not allowed in the main cabin. Deciding I need a drink, I rise from my seat.

I walk over to the bar and pour a couple fingers of whisky into a tumbler, followed by the clink of ice-cubes into the amber liquid. I stop to wonder what had made me pour this particular type of drink. Sighing softly, I take it with me back to my seat. Mason flicks his gaze up to me and, before I can protest, grabs hold of me by my hips and pulls me down onto his lap, causing me to nearly spill the drink. I place it down carefully next to the Battleship board with a playful huff.

"Mr. Verger, would you mind letting me up, please?" I ask, forcing myself to flirt. He chuckles lightly and grins, placing a hand on my thigh and slipping it upwards beneath my long black skirt.

Placing my hand over his, I manage to stop him from going any further. Yet he is so insistent that I decide to use it to my advantage. I slide off his lap and saunter down the aisle to the sleeping area, glancing coquettishly over my shoulder at him. He stares for a moment, then says something to Margot, waggling his eyebrows suggestively. He rises from his seat and smooths down his suit.

"*You know, in your get-up, Pearl, sweetheart? You look delightful wearing what you do,"*

Mason purrs in my ear as soon as we are in his sleeping cabin, wrapping his arms around me and pulling me back flush against his chest. His hand is back on my thigh, sliding up under the skirt to cup me through my lace knickers. He turns me around, pushing me back towards the bed, stripping off his suit jacket and tie.

I fall onto it and he follows me, crawling over me with an eager grin. Never breaking his gaze, I reach one hand into the chest of drawers near the bed and retrieve a condom packet. I playfully dangle it in front of his face, and he pouts and sighs. Reluctantly he sits up to tear the packet open, grumbling non-stop. I unbuckle his belt, looking up at him coyly from beneath my lashes. He eagerly takes care of the rest and is soon nude from the waist down. He rolls the condom onto his stiff cock as I roll up my skirt to expose the *Sinful Delight* lace thongs attached to tights with black ribbons. Pulling the lace to one side, I allow him to push his hips forwards into mine.

Mason flips onto his back and takes me with him. He grabs hold of the lace thongs, ripping them to shreds and tossing them unceremoniously to the far side of the room like so much garbage. I stare at him incredulously, ready to start a fight. He merely places his hands behind his head with a smug look, thrusting his hips up and down, indicating I ride him.

I fetch the lube from the same drawer and apply it generously to his sheathed cock, kneeling between his thighs and smiling seductively. I must be a very good actor, for on the inside I am feeling close to murder. I straddle him and reach behind to slick some lube between my cheeks. Smirking, I place my hands on his chest, nails painted crimson with silver ferns. I lift my hips up, reaching back to grasp his condom-covered cock and guide it to where it needs to go. Slowly I slide myself down onto him, closing my eyes and lolling my head back with a feigned sigh of ecstasy (play it up good, he will love it). His hands squeeze my hips and ass and he stares at me with a lusty grin as we get a good rhythm going. Again I close my eyes and toss my head back as he meets each of my downward thrusts with an upward thrust of his own. Soon I'm not faking a thing. It's starting to feel very, very good, but it is not Mason beneath me...

My body gradually stills and Mason frowns up at me. My head snaps back up and I stare down at him. Fragments of memory are flashing before my eyes, starting up like an old film reel. Without a word I slip his cock out of me, scramble off the bed and make my way to the bathroom. Mason watches me indignantly, shouting something I don't hear. I close the door, sit on the toilet seat and let the memories overtake me.

Sunlight filtering through a curtain.

Dogs lolling in a garden.

Maroon eyes and a soft whisper of "I want to make love to you. May I?" A voice purrs in reply, "Come here, H...i...bal."

Walking seven dogs in dappled sunlight, a kiss shared and arms wrapped around each other.

I slowly come out of this second fractured memory. In a daze I rise, open the door, and rejoin Mason on the bed. He is, to put it mildly, not happy, grumbling something I can't hear. He grabs me roughly, pulling me back onto his lap. I manage to mutter an apology. Then comes the tedious business of sorting the condom for a new one, lubing ourselves up again, lowering myself onto his cock again. I go through the motions, my body present but my mind elsewhere. He grunts slightly and rolls me over onto my back. He starts thrusting hard, jolting my body up and down and burying his face in the crook of my neck. Yet I'm not even thinking about what he is doing to me with his pig-like rutting.

I'm thinking of something else. Turning my face to one side on the stark white pillow, I wonder if my imagination is beginning to blur with my reality. A creature of black ochre and

unseeing eyes of white is watching me being taken as it crouches in the shadows, waiting. My body tenses beneath Mason, eyelids rapidly fluttering as I gasp breathlessly.

I can hear him groan heavily as I drag my nails down the man's back and clench my thighs tightly around his waist. The creature is still watching.

"Ripper..." I whisper as I come.

LOCATION - FLORENCE, ITALY

THE COURTING MUSE HOTEL

MID MORNING OF THE FOLLOWING DAY

PEARL-LACE/WILL'S P.O.V.

After landing in Florence and deplaning the private jet, we go straight to the hotel - ***The Courting Muse*** . Mason had insisted I share a room with him. We are in the large bedroom, jet-lagged and attempting to unpack.

*"So... who's **Ripper?"***

"Just....someone I met a long time ago."

Mason gives a small *"Hmm"* upon hearing my answer, stabbing out his cigarette into an ashtray on the bedside table as he sits up against the mound of pillows on the hotel bed. He watches me as I calmly change into some new feminine clothes Margot had given me - ones she didn't wear anymore or had never worn before. I check to ensure the corset is not too tight and smooth the tights so they don't crinkle, then turn to see he has gotten off the bed.

He heads over to the wardrobe, reaching in to bring out three dresses - a long ruffled black one, with a group of silver fish swimming around and around up to the v-neck, where they split apart to flow over the shoulders of the dress; another one which laces at the back and flares out slightly like a ballgown; and finally, an emerald ribbed dress with stenciled black ivy.

I walk over to him, reaching out for one dress, only to change my mind. I choose the v-necked one with the fish, taking it off the hanger and slipping it on. Mason places the others back into the wardrobe and turns to me with an appreciative eye.

Smoothing the dress down over my chest and hips, I look at myself in the mirror and am pleased with what I see. My hair is neatly shaved on one side, while the rest is slicked to hang down the other side of my face; light sea blue-green feathered earrings sway from my ears; and lilac lipstick outlining my lips completes the transformation. I can hear the faint strains of Bizet - *Habanera* - starting to play in my mind.

LOCATION - FLORENCE, ITALY

EXACT LOCATION UNKNOWN

THE MIDNIGHT HOURS

HANNIBAL'S P.O.V.

My back arches off the silk sheets of the large king size bed as my orgasm subsides and my breath slows. Augustuv-Magnus Coquille rolls off of me, panting, sweating, and satisfied. I can feel him turn onto his side and caress my lips with his thumb. I am still blindfolded and bound. To my immense shame I begin to whimper pitifully, tilting my head back on the pillows as tears run down my cheeks and onto the sheets.

"Ahhh...sweetheart....don't cry. Don't cry," I hear him whisper soothingly in my ear. He reaches behind my head to untie the blindfold. I see him looking down at me with possessiveness in his eyes.

I turn my face away from his gaze, wishing my beloved ***Mongoose,*** my sweet ***Pearl-Lace, mano mylimasis,*** was here to rid me of this snake who traps me by wrapping its body around me and constricting me in its embrace.

"There is something I want to show you. Will you behave, Nimue, my sweet?" he asks me, gently grasping my chin and turning my face toward him. Knowing what will happen if I disobey, I nod silently, and he smiles.

The black long-sleeved dress with a ruffled lace collar that rises to my neck, adorned with a large fiery opal, accentuates my figure, while two splits near the hem allow me to move my thighs. Underneath it, I am wearing crimson and black rose-patterned thongs and clip-on tights that rise above the knee. They are embellished with lace ruffles in the shape of ornate roses of crimson and black.

I lift up my head to look at myself in the large mirror, revealing the red wedding veil he has placed over my face. His hands touch my shoulders, and he places his lips against my ear.

"It suits you."

At those words I feel the formation of a solitary teardrop. It runs down my cheek to drip onto the wooden floor, forming a small sad puddle.

LOCATION - FLORENCE, ITALY

THE COURTING MUSE HOTEL

FOURTEEN DAYS LATER

EARLY EVENING

PEARL-LACE/WILL'S P.O.V.

Mr. Anthony Dimmond - a poet at heart and a kind-hearted soul - had been introduced to me by Margot and Alana when we had both come downstairs to the large dining hall of the hotel - ***The Courting Muse*** . I now sit with him at a round table in the hall, talking about a person he had met called Nimue, who I suspect has some connection to ***the Ripper.***

They had fallen in love, but he soon discovered that Nimue had since been married to the prominent club owner Mr. Agustuv-Magnus Coquille. He had only been able to see them from afar, sadly watching them stand unhappily next to that snake of a man. A part of me wants to find this person and try to get some answers from them.

Sighing softly, I bring the glass of wine up to my lips. I stop suddenly when I hear Anthony give a broken whisper of "*Nimue*!?" Following Anthony's startled gaze, I turn my head and see them descending the staircase in a black lace dress adorned with golden swirls, with matching gloves. Around their throat is an ornate choker with fiery gems shaped like snake's eyes. I look also at the man who accompanies them.

Anthony starts to get up, but I place my hand on his arm, shaking my head with a warning glance. He reluctantly sits back down. The man is no doubt Mr. Augustuv-Magnus Coquille. He has slicked back ash blonde hair and wears gold-rimmed pince-nez glasses. There is a ring on his left ring finger, as there is on Nimue's. Nimue does not look in our direction, and in fact keeps their eyes downcast, looking at nothing and no one.

Anthony is bristling next to me, obviously longing to get up and confront the man who has stolen his beloved. I place a hand gently over his. He turns his face to look at me, and calmly I lean forward to nuzzle affectionately against his cheek. I am fully aware that Mr. Coquille is watching us out of the corner of his eye. I am wagering that my little performance fools him into thinking I am Anthony's new beau or lover.

"Darling, I'm starving. Shall we order?" I ask Anthony, who summons a waiter. At the same time, another waiter arrives at Mr. Coquille's table. We allow Margot to place the orders. She is slightly more relaxed lately as her brother Mason is away on business, acquiring new stock for Verger Farms.

Alana, it seems, has gone rather pale and is starting to tremble. She politely excuses herself, saying *"I feel a headache coming on. I think I'll return to our room and rest for a while."*

With a quick reassurance to Margot, who grasps her hand with concern, Alana heads up the staircase and disappears from sight.

"You know, I don't think it is coincidence that he is here with Nimue. He just wants to show me I can't go near them at all," Anthony whispers, making it look to our fellow diners - especially Mr. Coquille - like he might be whispering something sultry into my ear.

"Darling, I thought we agreed to wait until *after* we have something to eat. God, you are incorrigible!" I say with a grin, loud enough for the prying ears of Mr. Coquille to hear. I lean close and whisper back: *"If he has harmed Nimue, I won't regret gutting him or even finding a way to get rid of him by using Mason's pigs."* I kiss his cheek lightly, enjoying our performance, as our dinner finally arrives.

Tonight I Can Write the Saddest Lines

Chapter Summary

Tonight I can write the saddest lines.

Write, for example, 'The night is shattered
and the blue stars shiver in the distance.'

The night wind revolves in the sky and sings.

- Pablo Neruda, from *Tonight I Can Write the Saddest Lines*

LOCATION - FLORENCE, ITALY

EXACT LOCATION UNKNOWN

THE MIDNIGHT HOURS

HANNIBAL'S P.O.V.

"*Ahh, there you are, my dear. You have returned to me. You are so lovely, my darling Nimue. So very lovely. I am the luckiest man in the world, do you know that? You are soon to be mine, precious one.* ***All mine."***

There is a blindfold over my eyes, and my hands are tied by my wrists to the sides of the bed. I am naked. My body aches from the torture it has endured from Coquille's violet wand. I am weary, but I crave some kind of relief, some kind of rest. I feel his lips and tongue greedily travel over my skin - lips, neck, throat. Down my chest, encircling and biting my nipples, down to my abdomen. His hands caress and stroke me, his touch surprisingly gentle.

I find myself grateful for the blindfold. It provides me with a means of surviving this ordeal. It allows me to imagine that it is not Coquille doing these things to my body, but... Will. My beloved ***Pearl-Lace.*** He has become my salvation and my refuge.

My cock is still embarrassingly erect, and I feel his tongue glide up its length as if he were licking an ice cream cone, while a hand caresses my balls. His soft moans of pleasure vibrate through my groin as he slowly slides his mouth over my hard length, taking it all down until I can feel the head bump against the back of his throat. He swallows several times, throat

muscles contracting around my cock and causing a deep moan to escape my lips. *Oh, Will. Will, you are amazing, my darling. That feels so nice.*

Several minutes pass as I revel in Will's skillful mouth and tongue. My arms strain against their bonds; I wish I could run my hands through his beautiful curls. I thrust gently into his mouth as my lips soundlessly form him name.

Without warning his mouth slides off me with a final swirl of his tongue. I am bereft, but not for long. His hands spread my thighs wide, and I hear the snick of a bottle of lube being opened. A hand slips between my ass cheeks and I flinch at the sudden coolness of the liquid as it is swirled around the rim of my anus. I gasp as a finger slips inside teasingly for a moment. His other hand, also wet with lube, strokes my aching cock several times as I begin to whimper in anticipation. A low voice murmurs endearments all the while. It is Will's voice.

At last, both strong hands slide up the backs of my thighs, under my knees, and wrap one leg around his waist and the other onto his shoulder. "Are you ready for me, my angel?" a voice purrs. Will's voice. *Oh God, Will. Yes, my love. Take me. Make me yours forever*.

"Yes" is all I can say. With a sigh he pushes his pelvis forward, and I can feel his slicked-up cock slowly breach my rim and slide into my body. I feel his hands all over my torso as he begins to thrust. I want to sing. *Will. Will! I love you so much, my pearl. I am in heaven.*

It does not take long for the passion to build. The sounds of flesh slapping upon flesh, grunts, moans, groans and gasps fill the air. I can picture Will above me, his head thrown back, eyes closed in ecstasy, sweat in his lovely hair and on his beautiful body, my name on his lips. It is enough to push me over that glorious edge, and I come like a tidal wave, roaring my ecstasy into the void. My cock is trapped between our bodies, white pearls - *pearls!* - shooting out onto my sweating skin. I don't quite remember why I shouldn't, but it takes every ounce of willpower I possess to refrain from shouting his name.

Will! Will!! Oh God, WILL!!!!

Moments later, my mind beginning to clear, I am flung most rudely back to earth. The man above me is gripping my shoulders, hard enough to bruise. He is ramming himself into me with brutal force. I feel his foul breath on my face, his sticky, clammy body against me. He is cumming, filling me with the sickly warmth of his seed, at the same time moaning lustily.

"NIMUE....SWEET NIMUE!!!!"

The spell is broken. The illusion is gone, snuffed out like a candle flame. Will is not here. He never was here. There is only *him*. My heart shatters into countless jagged pieces, and I am alone.

LOCATION - FLORENCE, ITALY

THE COURTING MUSE HOTEL

FOURTEEN DAYS LATER

EARLY EVENING

HANNIBAL'S P.O.V.

"Sweetheart, is something wrong? You look pale."

I lift my head to look at Augustuv-Magnus Coquille - my husband. He had forced me to marry him the night he had claimed my body so thoroughly, so that I knew I belonged to him and no one else. Taking a napkin folded into the shape of a swan, I unfold it and smooth it over my lap.

"I'm fine," I reply, knowing my answer has not convinced him. I continue to smooth out the napkin as the waiter arrives, another waiter approaching the table across from us at the same time.

Something about the group of people there makes me turn my head to look at them.

Time seems to stand still. Every sound in the crowded dining hall fades away except the pounding of my heart in my ears.

Is it... can it possibly be.....Will!!!?....in his ***Pearl-Lace*** persona? My love, my darling, my fallen angel?

Anthony Dimmond is seated next to him; they appear to be engaged in flirtatious conversation. Apparently I rise from my chair - I have no memory of doing so - for dimly I can hear Agustuv-Magnus inquire, "*Nimue, darling? What's wrong?"* I make an attempt to answer, but no words are forthcoming.

I cannot speak. Trembling with the shock of seeing him here in Florence with Margot Verger, I turn to run out of the large hotel dining hall, passing people coming in from the tennis courts down below the large veranda. I knock over a waiter carrying a tray of drinks to a family enjoying the sun streaming down upon the veranda, amid exclamations of "*Good gracious*!" or "*Signora, are you all right?"* I continue to run, barely registering the chaos.

I stumble down the flight of stone steps, nearly knocking over a couple coming up.

Blindly I run toward the cliff-face path. I am not in control of myself. My world seems to be shattering like a fine china teacup that has been dropped from a great height, dashing itself to a million tiny fragments.

Anthony Dimmond's P.O.V.

"NIMUE!?"

I leap to my feet and pursue them as they race heedlessly from the dining hall. I barely register Will standing and calling after me in concern. I follow Nimue outside, momentarily losing sight of them, shouting their name desperately. At last I see their figure in the far distance, wearing the beautiful black lace dress with golden swirls upon it that I remember so well from that first night back in Baltimore, seemingly a lifetime ago.

They are standing at the very edge of one of the tall sea cliffs close to the hotel, the wind whipping the dress about in its grasp. I almost stumble in my running towards them and yet, my heart is furiously pounding in my ears and my mind is screaming *Reach them!!! Reach them!!!*

Hannibal's P.O.V:

"NIMUE!?"

A voice shouting my name from afar makes me slowly turn my head to see a figure running towards me. Stepping back from the sea cliff edge, I wait until they reach me. I see it is Anthony, panting heavily from running down the path to the sea cliffs. He bends over, hands on his knees to catch his breath, then wiping his mouth he stands up straight.

"Nimue....don't be a fool. Your life is worth so much more than to be thrown away like this," he implores, stepping closer to me. I step backward, sending some pebbles skittering off the cliff edge to fall down into the crashing waves.

"You.....think I don't know that?" I ask, only mouthing the words because I can't say them out loud. He steps even closer as I shake my head from side to side, trying to stop him.

Suddenly I slip on the moist ground and find myself falling backward into empty air. I feel a jolt, then a slight pained grunt coming from Anthony. Lifting my head slightly, I see he has managed to get us halfway back onto the cliff, gripping me tightly with one hand digging into the bare earth.

He manages to fling me up onto the cliff, my body rolling slightly onto the path. I watch him lift his head to look at me - gentle, soft eyes filled with love for me. He weakly smiles, letting go of the earth he has dug his hand into. With a gasp and a cry, I scramble upward and reach out for him. But it is too late. I watch him falling in slow motion down into the roaring white waves.

Just before he falls, our fingertips brush against each other. His beautiful patterned scarf flies up in the strong wind and lands beside me on the ground. I pull myself away from the edge, picking up the scarf with trembling fingers. I sit on the ground hunched over, trying to curl in

on myself and disappear. I can feel thick, heavy tears squeeze from my eyes and run down my cheeks, glittering in the light of the setting sun.

A Glistening Drop of Amber

Chapter Summary

Where sorrowing they weep into the stream forever.
And each tear as it falls shines in the water
A glistening drop of amber.
- Ovid, from *Metamorphoses*

THREE DAYS LATER

LOCATION - FLORENCE, ITALY

EXACT LOCATION UNKNOWN

The still body of a man floats slowly down a shaded river until it comes to rest in the long, large roots of entwined poplar trees, their leaves murmuring over the bank of an unknown river. The cool light of dawn streaming through the canopy of the poplar trees reveals it is Anthony Dimmond.

Blood trickles lightly into the water from a wound on his forehead, causing little amber swirls to spread outward in the clear light blue water. A soft pained moan escapes from his lips, hands twitching weakly. Suddenly a shadow covers him. Strong hands slip under his body, lifting him out of the water.

Cradling him in their arms.

His head lolls into a warm chest as he sinks into unconsciousness. He remembers nothing thereafter.

ONE WEEK LATER

LOCATION - FLORENCE, ITALY

THE ENGLISH CEMETERY

LATE MORNING

HANNIBAL'S P.O.V.

Black stone-carved statues in paroxysms of death-like ecstasy line the long pathway as I walk down to the temple, wearing a long black funeral dress and veil. Coming to a stop, I see in the distance Anthony's remaining relatives gathered around an open grave as a coffin is lowered into the ground.

Detective Pazzi of ***La Poliza*** had discovered a body near a river named for the river mentioned in the story of Phaethon and the tears of the Heliades. I remember Pazzi well from my youth when I had killed here in Florence, becoming ***Il Mostro di Firenze*** and seducing my prey through my Nimue persona. I had gone under a different name at the time - Mariska Undine Dvaras.

In my lace-gloved hands I hold a bouquet of the flowers *Geranium phaeum,* or Mourning Widow flowers. Although I am not Anthony's widow, I am grieving as though I were. Next to me in the round temple in which I stand, close to the archway, is a black marble statue of a woman with a skeleton ripping itself out of her body, holding its bony hands out to a shrouded angel with spreading wings.

Sunlight filters down from the ocular window above, adorned with rose patterns. Shadows in jewel-like tones of crimson, soft yellow, warm orange and lime green are thrown onto the floor of the temple area attached to the long pathway.

Anthony's relatives have left, but I remain standing quietly in the temple. After a time I hear footsteps behind me. I turn to see....***Will.*** He is standing there wearing a suit, looking like his regular self. I can see, though, that he is still wearing earrings, and this time his lips are covered in ***Apple-Kiss Bon*** lipstick. I turn to fully face him and we just stare into one another's eyes for - well, who knows how long. He is still the most beautiful human being I have ever seen. I wait for him to speak.

"I.....remember.....I remember," he starts to say, causing my heart rate to speed up. I step closer to him until he suddenly grabs hold of my arms and pulls me flush against him.

The funeral veil around my face is ripped off and flung to one side.

Discarded.

Outside I hear thunder suddenly cracking, booming overhead. A deluge of rain soon begins to fall as he takes my lace-gloved hand in his.

"*Come with me."*

"Where else would I go?"

"Haan...Hannibal...I love you."

"I... I love you as well, mylimasis."

PEARL-LACE/WILL'S P.O.V.

I hold one of Nimue's - Hannibal's - lace-gloved hands in mine as we run through the graveyard, passing the many tombstones that line the path. We head toward the river, where there is an old boat house hidden by the *hedera helix* that grows upon it, and four large weeping willows with branches entwined in and out of the ground.

Everything had come back - the fractured memories of *the accident,* as it had been called by Alana, who had been the one leading Hannibal into a snare, stabbing me out of jealousy when she had seen me as ***Pearl-Lace*** ; and of Abigail, who had pushed me out of the window.

I worry that if I tell Hannibal what Abigail had done, our reunion will undoubtedly be spoiled. I put it out of my mind for now and take him to the door of the boat house. Smiling back at Hannibal, I push it open and lead him into the warm, welcoming interior. Sitting on a chaise lounge with a bandage wrapped around his head, nursing a tumbler of brandy, is Anthony, who smiles softly at the sight of us.

"An....Anthony!!? You're alive!!?" Hannibal gasps, voice breaking with emotion. He rushes to make sure that what he sees before him isn't an illusion. Anthony takes hold of his black lace-gloved hands, kissing the palms of them gently while inhaling the sweet perfume he wears - ***Nightshade Bloom***, which I recognise as one of the perfumes I had seen in the luxurious bathroom in his house back in Baltimore.

Hannibal turns his face to gaze lovingly at me over his shoulder and holds out one of his hands to me, indicating I should join them. I lock the door first and pull the window curtains closed. Smiling, I walk over and sit next to him. Hannibal takes my hand as he sits between Anthony and myself on the chaise lounge. He leans in close to kiss me - or he would have, if it hadn't been for the window suddenly shattering into pieces with a loud bang.

I look down in shock and see a smoke-gas canister has landed on the floor. Before I can gather my wits it explodes, completely filling the room with white smoke.

The Sea Was Sapphire Coloured

Chapter Summary

> The sea was sapphire coloured, and the sky
> Burned like a heated opal through the air;
> We hoisted sail; the wind was blowing fair
> For the blue lands that to the eastward lie.
>
> - Oscar Wilde, from *Greece*

LOCATION - HIDDEN COVE NEAR THE ISLAND OF THASSOS

LATE AFTERNOON

The sailboat bearing red sails lies anchored near a hidden cove in the clear blue ocean. A golden retriever lopes up the stairs from below decks and heads over to a person lying on a towel on their stomach, as another person sits next to them reading through Ovid's *Metamorphoses.* The dog flops down between them both, nudging the person lying on the towel.

ANTHONY DIMMOND'S P.O.V.

I hear Will, lying next to me on the large towel, give a small, pleased "*Hmm, hey Winston, old boy,"* scratching said dog between the ears. A splashing sound makes me turn my head to watch Hannibal coming up the rung ladder on the side of the boat, covered in droplets of sea water which run down to the narrowing of his hips and naked body.

"The water is fine if you both wish to join me," he says, coming over to lay down on his back next to me on the towel. Bookmarking the page I was reading, I place the book to one side as I lay down, looking up at the light blue sky spread with wispy smoke-like clouds.

"Any excuse to get us to go skinny dipping, hey Anthony?" Will chuckles. I don't really hear him as I'm thinking about something else.

"Hmm, what? Sorry, yeah....I wouldn't mind taking a swim. Maybe later, I need to sort some things out at the moment," I reply, sighing heavily. Hannibal rolls onto his side, propping himself up on his elbow to look down at me. He places a hand on my chest, stopping me from sitting up.

"Anthony, what's wrong? Tell us," Hannibal insists in his ***Nimue*** voice. I open my mouth, and yet the bloody words won't come out.

Cursing in my own native language - Greek - I get up, leaving them both to watch me go and try to figure out what is bothering me. I head down the stairs into the lower levels of the sailboat.

Inside the shared sleeping cabin's shower, I lower my head and feel the lukewarm water pounding on my back, washing away the sweat, grime and filth that has accumulated on my body. I am remembering another time, another place.

A little boy runs through a meadow of tall swaying grass, holding in his arms a small injured orphaned fawn. He continues on into the shrouded woodland where he follows a secret path to a tall towering giant sequoia, or Giant Redwood.

There is a large hollow in the tree. Going inside with the fawn, the little boy gently lays it down among a bed of leaves. He looks around and finds the battered tin filled with bandages, antiseptic wipes and plasters.

Slowly and gently, he starts to tend to the little fawn's injuries. The fawn stays patient and still because they feel no threat from the child. Smiling softly, the little boy sits back to admire his good deed for the day.

"ANTHONY!!!"

The smile turns to panic. He makes sure the little fawn is well hidden, then clambers out of the hollow. He places branches over it to cover it from prying eyes, then runs back down the secret path and through the meadow of swaying grass, just as thunder booms overhead.

Something is wrong.

Anthony sits up abruptly in his bed, clutching the bed covers to his chest. He sees the lightning flashing in the distance and trembles. He is worrying about the little fawn. He gets out of bed, throwing on some clothes and fetching a blanket from the linen cupboard.

Running down the secret path, he comes to the hollow of the giant sequoia. He anxiously pulls the branches back to reveal the little fawn, who lifts their head up to look at him. Smiling, he wraps the blanket around them.

After lighting a fire in the hearth of the fireplace in his bedroom, Anthony watches Pepilo - his little chow puppy - sniff curiously at the little fawn and lick softly at its nose. The fawn wrinkles their nose and sneezes, then nuzzles up against the puppy, who accepts his newfound friend.

Days pass by. The little fawn is recovering and playing with the chow as Anthony writes poems inspired by the sight of them playing together. Sunlight filters down through the canopy of the large oak tree, where new leaves are starting their flush of growth. A heron wades into the stream looking for fish, while the little boy enjoys the company of his only friends.

Coming out of the memory, I reach up with one hand to switch the shower off. It is silent except for the water running off my back to drip into the remaining water now swirling down the drain in a small whirlpool. The shower door opening causes me to remain still. I soon feel hands wrap around my waist to pull me back against a warm, muscular chest.

I turn around in Will's arms and place my arms around his neck. I bury my face into the crook of his neck, feeling him switch the shower back on again so the water rains down on us both. Pulling back slightly, I look into sea blue-green eyes, and they look lovingly into mine.

My heart rate speeds up slightly. I rest my forehead against his. Licking my lips, I place them against his to test his reaction, only for him to smash his lips into mine with a moan. Will lifts me up against the tiled wall, and I wrap my thighs around his waist.

He deepens our kiss, turning his face this way and that, as our tongues entwine inside and outside our mouths. I release his lips to give a hitched, breathless gasp when he suddenly pushes his hips upward, sliding his cock into my somehow...*well-lubricated*...entrance. It feels like something very close to heaven. I soon feel him fully sheathed within me.

My head tilts backward, one hand grasping Will's shoulder and the other taking hold of the back of his head, sifting through his wet, curly locks. I feel him penetrating me so deeply, and I gasp with the pleasure of it. But the sly devil leaves me no time to adjust, starting to thrust his hips forward and back as he lifts me up and down at the same time.

Breathless moans, soft cries of pleasure and ecstasy fill the steamed-up shower cubicle. Will bends his head down to the crook of my neck, trailing his warm, moist lips up and down - licking, biting and sucking marks into my pale skin - then grabs one of my thighs to hold in the crook of his elbow, spreading me wider apart.

Everything soon dissolves into something I cannot yet explain.

The Head and the Hoof of the Law

Chapter Summary

> Now these are the Laws of the Jungle, and many and mighty are they;
> But the head and the hoof of the Law and the haunch and the hump is — Obey!
>
> - Rudyard Kipling, from *The Law of the Jungle*

LOCATION - FLORENCE, ITALY

THE FIRENZE MASQUERADE CLUB

MIDDAY

Mr. Agustuv-Magnus Coquille sits at a small table in the outdoor cafe of his exclusive establishment, the Firenze Masquerade Club, as the sun shines down upon him and the other patrons enjoying a midday break. He, however, does not have the look of a man enjoying anything much at all at the moment. He holds a thin black clove cigarette in one hand, a cup of espresso in the other. Alternating between drags on the cigarette and sips of the coffee, he appears worried and more than a little incensed. After a few minutes he checks his watch, sighs, and seems about to rise from his chair and depart when an imposing shadow falls over the table.

"Mr. Coquille, I presume," says a strong, no-nonsense voice. "I'm Agent Jack Crawford. My apologizes for being a bit late; taxis are almost impossible to find at this hour."

Coquille rises and shakes Jack's extended hand gratefully. "Not a problem, Agent Crawford. Thank you so much for coming; I realize this is quite an imposition on your time. Please, sit down. Can I get you something, coffee, tea?"

Jack, a bit jet-lagged, eyes Coquille's tiny espresso cup and grins. "A very large mug of your most caffeinated black coffee would be most welcome."

Coquille signals to a passing waiter. "*Una grande tazza di caffè nero per Signore Crawford, per favore.*"

As the waiter hurries off, Jack and Coquille settle into their chairs. Coquille folds his hands on the table and fixes Jack with a serious gaze.

"Again, I am truly grateful for your flying here on such short notice. But I would not have contacted you if your agent and your colleague were not involved."

Jack nods in acknowledgement. "I appreciate that, Mr. Coquille. Can you tell me just what this is all about?"

Coquille closes his eyes, inhales deeply, slowly releases his breath, and opens his eyes again. "I believe that your agent, Will Graham, and your colleague, Dr. Hannibal Lecter, have been kidnapped. Kidnapped by a man who is supposedly dead."

Jack barely registers the waiter returning with his coffee. His eyebrows shoot up almost into his hairline. "*Kidnapped*? By a *dead man*? I - please, explain."

Coquille sighs and takes another drag from his clove. "Mr. Anthony Dimmond, a man with ties to both Lecter and Graham, was reportedly killed when he fell from a cliff at the Courting Muse Hotel here in Florence about a month ago. His funeral was held at the English Cemetery. The same day as the funeral, both Agent Graham and Dr. Lecter disappeared, and a man answering Dimmond's description was seen procuring supplies in San Niccolò several days later. I have reason to believe that Dimmond is still alive and has kidnapped Dr. Lecter and Agent Graham, for what reason I do not purport to know. I am asking you to find them and return them to Florence, and to see that Dimmond is prosecuted for his crime."

Even after several gulps of coffee, Jack still looks startled. He stares at the table for a moment, watching the elegant gray smoke curl up from Coquille's cigarette. Finally he says with a sigh, "Well, I suppose I and the FBI do have a vested interest in finding them safe. Have you contacted Interpol about this?"

Coquille flicks cigarette ash into the ashtray and takes another sip of espresso. "I would prefer to keep Interpol out of this matter, if at all possible," he replies smoothly, his steady gaze still on Jack. "And myself." He cocks an eyebrow. "Do you understand?"

"Absolutely," acknowledges Jack with a nod. "Can you tell me who found Dimmond's body - I mean, *alleged* body? Who took charge of the case?"

"Yes, Detective Rinaldo Pazzi of the *Polizia di Firenze*," replies Coquille with slight distaste.

"Good, I'll start with him. Mr. Coquille," Jack rises and extends his hand, "it was a pleasure to meet you; I wish it had been under more pleasant circumstances." Coquille rises, shake's Jack hand and nods. "We have each other's numbers; I will call or text as soon as I hear something. I trust you will do the same."

"You have my word, Agent Crawford. *Buona fortuna a te* - best of luck to you. I pray that this unfortunate matter is drawn to a swift and satisfactory conclusion for all parties involved," replies Coquille.

Jack nods, and with a wave he departs. Coquille takes his seat once again and lights another clove, drawing on it slowly and exhaling a cloud of gray smoke. Staring off at some unknown point in the distance, he mutters under his breath:

*"Nimue, my sweet - you **will** return to me. Dimmond will pay dearly for what he has done. And Graham? He may provide a few moments' - **amusement**...."*

LOCATION - FLORENCE, ITALY

OFFICE OF DET. RINALDO PAZZI, POLIZIA DI FIRENZE

MIDDAY

"*Alive*?! Surely you cannot be serious, Agent Crawford. Anthony Dimmond may be alive? Then just who is buried in that grave?" Detective Pazzi sputters, unable to believe what Jack has just told him.

"Settle down, Detective. The key word here is *may*," replies Jack, raising a reassuring hand and settling back in his chair in Pazzi's office. "A man fitting his description was seen alive in San Niccolò several weeks ago. We don't know for sure that it's him, and that's why I'm here. I have reason to believe this man has kidnapped one of my special agents and a psychiatrist I sometimes bring in as a consultant. They both disappeared from Baltimore quite some time ago, but I have been informed that both of them have recently been seen here in Florence."

"I see," Pazzi replies warily. "And just who is your - informant?"

"I am not at liberty to say. I promised to keep their name out of it." Jack's firm tone implies that he will brook no discussion on this matter. Pazzi does not look appeased, and begins to stroke his chin thoughtfully, his gaze unfocused. Jack interrupts his reverie.

"Could I perhaps see some photographs of the body you found? And any you might have of Dimmond himself?"

"Of course," mutters Pazzi, his mind still elsewhere. He shuffles through a stack of files and papers on his desk, eventually retrieving a file and handing it to Jack. "The body was discovered with Dimmond's wallet in the inside pocket of his suit jacket. The face, along with the entire body in fact, was so badly mangled and bruised from its journey through the water that it was difficult to make a positive identification. But the relatives who had arrived for the funeral assured us that it was him, even though it had been quite some time since they had seen him."

Jack nods and grimaces as he looks through the photographs, which are indeed rather gruesome. The man is wearing the suit that employees at the hotel identified as the one Dimmond had been wearing that day. It is torn and stained with blood. There are several compound fractures of the arms and legs. Jack compares these photos to one of Dimmond taken several years previously in Baltimore, according to a note on the back. The face is truly unrecognizable as Dimmond's, or anyone else's for that matter. But the hair and body are similar enough that a fairly positive ID could be made (but "fairly positive" doesn't quite cut it, thinks Jack). The body must have been tossed against large sharp rocks and may have been partially devoured by fish. Jack sighs and tosses the file back onto Pazzi's desk.

"Dimmond was originally from Baltimore? That is something I was not aware of," he muses, wheels turning in his brain. "He may have met Lecter and Graham there. That's something to go on, at least."

"Indeed. Now, if may I ask *you* if you have any photos of Dr. Lecter and Agent Graham? For our files, of course," says Pazzi.

"I do," replies Jack, digging into his briefcase and withdrawing two photographs. He hands them across the desk to Pazzi. "Feel free to keep those; we have plenty more."

Pazzi frowns as he looks at Will's photo; the man does not look familiar to him. But he freezes as he sees the photo of Hannibal. He can swear he has seen this man before. Something in the cold eyes, the high cheekbones, the angular jaw...

Jack intrudes upon Pazzi's thoughts once again. "So, Detective, I think we will need to exhume the body. Can you get ahold of Dimmond's dental records?"

After a moment, Pazzi's eyes snap up to Jack's. "Uh, yes. Yes, of course. And yes, I believe exhumation is the next step. Would you like to be present? I will contact you as soon as it is arranged, in the next day or two."

"That would be perfect," says Jack, rising from his chair and closing his briefcase. "Yes, I would very much prefer to be present. Please let me know the details as soon as you can." He shakes Pazzi's hand and heads out of the office, pulling his phone from his pocket to inform Coquille of his findings.

Pazzi remains seated at his desk, unable to take his eyes away from Hannibal's photograph. A small bundle of cold dread begins to form in his body, slowly enlarging until it threatens to burst.

"*Il Mostro*..." he whispers.

LOCATION - FLORENCE, ITALY

UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI FIRENZE

LATE AFTERNOON

"That is all for today. Please have the assigned chapters read for tomorrow," Mr. Coquille announces to the class as the bell rings.

Abigail gathers up her Historical Art textbook and notebook, tucks them into her backpack and heads down the steps of the lecture hall, the air filled with the chatter and bustle of the other students as they make their way out of the hall, anticipating lunchtime.

"Ah, Miss Fell - may I see you for a moment, please?" Coquille calls out to her, standing at his desk but looking down, not at her.

"Um, sure," says Abigail hesitantly. She has been anticipating this moment and is now overcome with dread. She approaches his desk, doing her best to appear unruffled.

Coquille waits until the last student has departed, then raises his eyes to Abigail with a smile that can only be described as serpentine.

"How is your father doing these days?" he asks smoothly. He notes Abigail's slight intake of breath and her nervous smile.

"Oh, didn't he tell you? He's taking a little vacation right now. He's been working so hard, and he-"

"A vacation? How pleasant for him," Coquille interrupts, hands behind his back and his gaze never wavering from Abigail's face. She feels vaguely like the proverbial deer in the headlights. "No, he did not deign to inform me. Did he happen to mention to you where he was going on this little vacation?"

"Um, you know, he didn't. It was very spur-of-the-moment, he just wanted to get away for a while. Can't say as I blame him," she adds with a nervous laugh. "But he's fine, he texts me every day."

"I see," purrs Coquille. He reaches into his suit jacket pocket and takes out his smartphone. He taps a few buttons, returns his gaze to Abigail and holds the screen up so she can easily see it. "I wonder if his sudden decision to *'take a vacation'* had anything to do with this?" He taps another button, and a video begins to play. A video obviously taken from a surveillance camera.

Hannibal, slashing the throat of a dark burly man who falls to the floor.

"Who... sent... you?"

"Filthy....faggot.....all high and mighty with that look you wear. You....just can't help it, can you? Disgusting faggot bitch!"

"You..fucking....psychopath...GET THE HELL OFF ME!!"

"Hmm, well....have you heard of....Il Mostro di Firenze, perhaps?"

Hannibal, biting off the man's tongue and watching as he bleeds to death.

Abigail gasps, her eyes wide, and covers her mouth in horror. Coquille calmly stops the video, never taking his eyes from Abigail's stunned face. "This is not the only video evidence I have of your *'father's'*, shall we say, *extra-curricular activities*? Would you like to see more?" he adds with an infuriating smirk.

"NO!" Abigail shouts, backing away from Coquille. Her eyes have become bright with tears and her voice is shaky and hoarse. "My *God*... What... what do you *want*?"

"Hannibal's location." Coquille's voice suddenly becomes hard and cold. "As you can see, I can make life very, very difficult for both of you - and for Mr. Graham and Mr. Dimmond as well - if you do not comply." He holds up the phone almost triumphantly, with a grin full of wicked glee. "He has all but confessed that he is *Il Mostro di Firenze*! I am sure the police would be *thrilled* to see this!" He takes a step closer to Abigail, who continues to back away. The tears are now coursing down her cheeks, and she is shaking her head in horrified denial. "Did you know the FBI itself is here, searching for him? I have no doubt they would absolutely *love* to see this as well."

In spite of her wracked condition, Abigail knows when she is beaten. She stops, pulls a handkerchief from her pocket and dries her eyes. She swallows, still trembling and fearful, breathing hard. Not daring to meet Coquille's gaze, she stares at the floor as she speaks in a dull, defeated monotone.

"They're on a sailboat. I don't know the name. I think they might have stolen it. The last I heard they were in Greece, near Thassos."

"Ahhhh," Coquille purrs, reaching out a hand to stroke Abigail's hair. She flinches from his touch but is otherwise still. "There, you see? That was not so difficult, was it? Thank you, my dear girl. Now, do I have to tell you that you *will not* be informing Hannibal of this conversation? No? Oh, well I just have, haven't I? How silly of me! Well, in any case, please do not force me to repeat it. That is all." He tucks the phone back into his jacket as Abigail runs from the room, wrenching the door open and slamming it behind her. He gazes wistfully up into the empty seats of the lecture hall.

"Have no fear, dearest Abigail. You will be seeing your 'father' and his companions again. ***Very soon****."*

A Shroud Darker Than Pitch Black

Chapter Summary

Cohesion has been fragmented,
merely an old dissolved memory.
A shroud darker than pitch black
heralds the omni-directional strangler,
seeking to crush the fragile neck
and slowly asphyxiate the minds reality.

- Pagan Paul, from *No Way Out*

CW: Nimue is essentially raped on their wedding night.

Hannibal's P.O.V.

Pausing by the door of the sleeping cabin, I look inside and see Will and Anthony - my sweet gentle angels - lying curled up on top of the duvet cover of the circular bed, blissfully asleep. I smile softly at the sight of them together.

Stepping into the room, I approach the bed and pull the blanket up around them. Anthony shifts in his sleep, snuggling closer to Will with a small "*Hmm."* I lightly kiss their cheeks, feeling myself tremble heavily as I whisper to them.

"*I love you both...so much. Forgive me."*

Reluctantly moving away from the warmth of their sleeping bodies, I allow Winston inside. After seeing him get comfortable at the end of the bed by their feet, I leave the sleeping cabin, closing the door silently behind me.

Standing in the hallway, I find myself rubbing the spot where Agustuv-Magnus Coquille's ring still rests on the ring finger of my left hand. No matter how much I desire it, I cannot deny that that vile man is still legally my husband.

I remember the day of the wedding and how I lost control of myself during the consummation of the wedding night.

"Do you, Augustuv-Magnus Coquille, take Nimue-Lurisa Venomis to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

"I do."

"Do you....."

Even though the veil covers my face, I tremble in the long-sleeved black dress with the ruffled lace collar coming up to my neck, upon which lies a large fiery opal in the shape of snake eyes. I reply to the question asked of me.

"I.....I.....do."

"Thank you. You may kiss your bride, Mr. Coquille-Venomis."

The crimson lace veil is lifted up and placed behind my head as he gently pulls me close to him; all a show for the high-class people who had been invited to the wedding. He kisses me in such a loving way that I find myself, to my shame and horror, kissing him back.

Before I can say another word, as he pulls back from me he sweeps me off my feet, eliciting squeals of delight from the bridesmaids. He carries me down the flight of steps and outside, where news reporters, camera crews and photographers are waiting.

"Smile, darling. It's our wedding, remember?" he whispers in my ear, hot breath against my cheek. I remember our violent encounter in my kitchen, and his vile threat of what would happen if I didn't acquiesce to his demands.

*I force myself to smile coquettishly, acting somewhat shy like any bride would on their wedding day, and he cups my cheek lightly as I wrap my arms around his neck. After tossing the bouquet of orchids - **Snake's head** (Fritillaria meleagris), **Mama's Pearl** (Ceologyne cristata), and **Lady Slipper** (Paphiopedilum x maudiae) - to some of the bridesmaids, I notice out of the corner of my eye that it is my darling Abigail - forced to be a bridesmaid - who catches it.*

"Look at me, Nimue."

Lifting my head up, I look at Augustuv-Magnus - my husband - as I stand close to the edge of the king size bed in his apartment bedchamber. I feel him cup both my cheeks in his hands, then he leans in close, nuzzling his nose affectionately against mine. Inhaling my scent.

His hands move down to slip around my waist, then up to slowly and methodically untie the laces of the dress. I find myself bringing up my hands to undo his tie, dropping it onto the armchair next to the window. His hands slip the wedding dress off as I step out of it, then he heads over to the large, ornate, polished oak wardrobe.

Walking to the window, I unthinkingly lift one hand up into the shaft of moonlight streaming down into the bedchamber's large windows. Even though the room is lit by snake-shaped lamps in wall-mounted sconces, the moonlight is still the brightest light in the bedchamber. I soon feel his hands wrapping around my waist from behind, reminding me where I am and why.

His head bends down into the crook of my neck. At the feel of his mouth trailing up and down - licking, sucking and biting - I cannot stop a wanton moan from escaping my lips. He whirls me around, pressing me up against the glass of the window, at the same time hitching my thighs around his waist as he lays me down on the window seat.

I remember a time when my sweet Will and I were in a similar situation. I start to feel hot, as if my skin is being burned by wicked little tongues of flame, as his hand unlaces the corset slightly to expose my nipples. He flicks his moist, heated tongue over the tip of one of them, causing me to give a hitched gasp as he does so.

His mouth engulfs my nipple, and I cradle the back of his head with both hands. Hitched gasping and breathless panting begin to fill the silence of the room. I tilt my head back to stare up at the ceiling, where a faded painting of ***Leda and the Swan*** *meets my eyes. Only it seems the swan has transformed into a wolf - or is it a snake? I cannot tell.*

He begins to strip me of my corset, lace thongs and tights until I am bared for him. He lifts me up from the window seat to carry me over to the bed, where I am laid down on soft satin sheets.

"Get onto your hands and knees, Nimue," he commands, giving me a look that indicates beyond any doubt that if I don't do what he says, he will carry out his threat to harm Abigail. I will my heart to stop thudding against my rib cage and roll onto my front.

Rising up onto my hands and knees as he demands, I suddenly arch my back with a cry of shock as something strikes down upon my back, stinging my skin. I fist my hands into the satin sheets for support. It happens again, sending lancing pain rippling up my spine as I cry out once more.

And again it strikes, causing me to collapse onto the sheets, a whimper escaping me before I can quell it. His hand soon grabs the back of my head by my hair, pulling me back up so I now see the mirror above the headboard. To my horror, it reveals him holding a cat-o-nine-tails whip in his other hand.

He brings it down hard, and I nearly scream from the pain. I manage to wrench free and reach for the ornate penknife on the bedside table. I lunge at him, holding the knife in both hands, but he manages to grab my wrists, effectively stopping me from plunging the knife into his eyeball. My hands begin to shake with the effort to release myself from his strong grip.

I struggle and strain to press the knife further down, only for him to flip the tables on me once again. I find myself being pinned heavily to the bed as he suddenly shoves his hips forward with a grunt, penetrating me in one single thrust that makes me cry out in shock and agony.

Back arching heavily and thighs trembling around his waist, I whimper at the feel of something slightly tearing within me. He pulls out with another grunt, reaching for the lube and pouring some into the palm of his hand. Then he reaches downward, making me twist the sheets in my hands for support once again, keeping my face turned to one side with eyes closed tight.

It hurts.

Everything inside me feels as if it is shattering into a thousand pieces of fragile china.

It hurts so much.

Coming out of the harsh, painful memory that I wish I could erase from my mind, I head into the kitchen area of the sailboat. I walk to the windowsill, where in a vase are some cuttings of *Prunus lusitanica* (Portugal laurel), *Parahebe catarractae* (Porlock purple) and *Passiflora* (passion flower). I bend and inhale their lovely scent, calming my nerves and easing the pain. I straighten to look at the light of the setting sun on the liquid silver waves of the Aegean Sea, spreading out like a path towards the boat. It seems to turn the water a warm-hued orange.

I take the burner phone out of my trouser pocket and dial in the number, hearing it ring in the silence of the kitchen. The call is answered, and I bring the phone up to my ear.

"*Yes. Who may I ask is calling? Hello? Who is this?!"*

"Hello, Abigail."

"*.....Hannibal!!!?"*

There's an East Wind Coming

Chapter Summary

> "There's an east wind coming all the same, such a wind as never blew on England yet. It will be cold and bitter, Watson, and a good many of us may wither before its blast."
>
> - Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *His Last Bow*, 1914

<u>Anthony Dimmond's P.O.V.</u>

The delicious smell of fresh food being cooked makes me flutter my eyes open softly, seeing Will still calmly sleeping next to me under the soft, warm duvet covers of the large bed in the sleeping cabin. Feeling my bladder protesting, I slip out from under the covers and head into the bathroom. After relieving myself, I look at my reflection in the bathroom mirror as I wash my hands.

There are hand-shaped bruises from when Will had gripped my hips tightly while I rode him, my hands resting on his chest, both of us still covered in droplets of water from the shower. I remember how I had cried out his name in the stillness of the sleeping cabin, clenching my thighs tightly around his waist and feeling his warm release spill into me.

Drying my hands on a towel from the rack, I walk back through to the bed area. I retrieve a nightgown from the wardrobe and wrap it loosely around me, seeing a case-file box behind some leather bags. I frown as I see the box has my name on it.

Why would Hannibal have it here?

How had he acquired it?

I kneel down, pulling the bags away from it. Licking my lips to wet them, I gaze at the box for a moment, then turn my head to look at Will. He is still sleeping contentedly beneath the covers, with Winston still snoozing at his feet. I push the bags back into place, get up and decide I need some coffee and something to eat.

I find Hannibal busy preparing a protein scramble in the kitchen area of the large sailboat named "***Erienades***". He smiles softly at me, raising one eyebrow at the nightgown, or more accurately, a kimono silk *chemise.* He then plates our breakfast as Will, yawning and ruffling a hand through his hair, wanders in wearing a blue nightgown.

"I trust you both had a good sleep," Hannibal says, as Will and I sit down on stools at the kitchen island counter, Will smiling a bleary smile at both of us over the rim of his coffee cup. I reach for the newspaper on the counter, but go still at the sight of the person on the front page - Kronos Dimmond, my uncle. I fold the newspaper, grateful not to look at it, and put it to one side as Hannibal places our plates down in front of us.

"Of a sort. Winston kept trying to get between us," I say, digging into the protein scramble - fluffy scrambled eggs, sweet, juicy sausages and tomatoes - and trying not to think that he intentionally placed that paper there to see what my reaction would be.

He comes around the kitchen island, placing his hands on my shoulders. I bring one hand up to take hold of the one on my right shoulder, turn my face and kiss his knuckles gently.

"I'm afraid we will need to go into town to procure more food and supplies for the boat. You know the island, Anthony, so would you mind showing Will and I around?" Hannibal asks. I give him a fake smile and, willing my heart to stop pounding against my rib cage, nod silently in reply.

The small town of Crietos, on the island of Thassos, is just as I remember it from my youth, when I arrived here to live with my uncle - my sexually-abusive, dominating uncle. I cannot help but remember all the hurt, pain and anguish he had caused me when I was just a child.

He had controlled every aspect of my life until I finally broke free of the metaphorical shackles he had wrapped around me. I ran away to Florence, Italy to start a new life. Now I was back in the place where the ghosts and demons of my past threatened to come rushing out of the oubliettes in which I had entrapped them.

Today is a festival day, celebrating Death - *Thanatos* - with many revellers wearing costumes and masks, while market stalls sell merchandise and children run about holding windmills or ribbons. Hannibal, in his ***Nimue*** guise, comes through the crowd, stepping out of the way to allow a group of children to run past him. He is breathtakingly lovely in a light blue off-the-shoulder top, earrings with goldish-brown feathers attached to them, and white jeans that accentuate his hips.

Will is nowhere in sight.

"Is something the matter?" Hannibal asks me with concern, seeing how I've wrapped my arms around myself, digging my nails into them. He places one hand on my arm as I keep my face turned to one side.

"It...This place brings back bad memories for me. You knew that, though, didn't you?" I ask, turning my gaze to him and feeling anger rising slightly in my voice. He moves his hand to cup my cheek gently.

"I can whisper through the chrysalis you have wrapped around yourself. But what you have beneath it, I cannot yet predict," he whispers, smiling with those lovely, dangerous, seductive crimson lips.

The same lips I find myself pressing my own lips against now, trying desperately to just enjoy this precious time we have together, as noise and clarity echoes around us.

Little did I know that soon everything would shatter apart, like mirrors being smashed.

Will's P.O.V.

Anthony's case file on his past is something I can see he would not want coming to light. I flick the lighter and place the wavering flame under the files, watching as they soon catch fire. The edges of the paper begin to turn black and crisp, some of the fragments breaking away. They dance and whirl in the wind that is starting up, causing the red sails of the "***Erienades"*** to whip back and forth.

It seems a storm is beginning to brew out there in the Aegean Sea, making its way toward the small island of Thassos and bringing the demons of Hannibal's, Anthony's, and my past with it. It recalls to my mind the old saying:

"Eurus is coming. Beware what is brought in by it. Because it may ruin you."

The Church of Bones

Chapter Summary

> But did he die in bed? Not that one! I saw to it!
> Now he worships in that bone church forever. Life is grand!
>
> - Stephen King, from *The Bone Church*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anthony Dimmond's P.O.V.

*My breathing is labored as Hannibal approaches me from behind, placing one hand over my eyes so I can no longer see the **Prey** in front of me: Kronos Dimmond, my hated uncle, who I have just ripped apart with the curved Devil's Fang hunting knives I hold in both my hands.*

Droplets of crimson petals are dripping onto the stone floor of his study, where every pain, agony and anguish this man had caused me had transpired. I feel Hannibal place his lips against my ear. One large, strong hand slips around to rest on my chest, feeling it rise and fall under his palm. He whispers in my ear.

"How beautiful you look right now. Covered in droplets of crimson."

The hunting knives slip out of my hands, fall to the floor and tumble into the large scarlet pool that spreads out from my uncle's dead body. Wrenching myself free, I stumble backward and fall into that sickening pool, causing it to splash up into the air.

Hannibal steps out of the shadows of the now changed scene.

A strange chapel-like area.

*Above are the many **Prey** he has hunted in skeletal form, reminding me of the Church of Bones, with all manner of roses, orchids, foxglove and deadly nightshade placed within the rib cages. On the walls grow Hedera helix - fiery orange and crimson.*

Hannibal brings his hands up to his naked chest, digging his sharp black glinting claws into his skin.

*He rips the flesh backward to expose what lies beneath, as when a snake sheds its skin. From all over his body he peels back the layers of skin until finally he reveals **Nimue -** her eyes sparkling like jewels - and allows the discarded, empty skin - his "person suit" - to fall onto the floor. She steps out, naked and covered in blood, her feet more like the clawed feet of*

some otherworldly creature. She collapses onto her hands and knees, arching her back with a wanton moan of ecstasy as something bursts out of her back - large crimson wings with curved talons.

They spread slowly outward until finally they are spread out wide and full, revealing their true size. They are terrible in their beauty.

She rises gracefully and approaches me, pulling me up onto my knees. She kneels before me. Her face and the right side of her body begin to crumble like sandstone, revealing Hannibal underneath. Lips smash into mine, and claws wrap themselves around me and drag down my back.

Blood trickles down my back at the same time ***Nimue****/Hannibal - conjoined in some way - bend their head to my chest and bite down into the flesh. My back arches in an intense spasm of movement.*

I emit a breathless gasp and my head tilts backward. I feel a strange sensation of euphoria at being eaten alive by them both in this way. Cradling the back of their head, I sift my hand through their hair.

The cracking of bones echoes sharply, the claws digging ever deeper into my back. And yet I feel no pain, only mind-numbing, unexplained pleasure. I remember the poem by Dante, and his strange dream of Beatrice Portinari.

Part of that poem is happening to me right now as I lower my head to see ***Nimue****/Hannibal begin to bite into the flesh of my still pulsating heart that lies in their cupped hands, as another voice whispers into my ear the poem in Italian.*

" *Allegro mi sembrava Amor tenendo*

Meo core in mano, e ne le braccia avea

Madonna involta in un drappo dormendo

Poi la svegliava, d'esto core ardendo

Lei paventosa umilmente pascea

Appreso gir lo ne vedea piangendo."

My eyes shoot open wide, my chest rising and falling heavily with the pounding of my heart. Hannibal, sleeping against me from behind, shifts slightly to lean over me, covering me with his shadow.

Will is watching us both, suggesting he has been awake all this time, observing me in the throes of my unsettling dream.

A hand softly touches my hip, causing me to tense slightly and look up into Hannibal's maroon eyes, seeing myself reflected in them. I feel as though he is staring deep into my soul. He slips downward, spreading my thighs wide apart to expose the wetness of my cum from the orgasm I had while having that strange.....*Erotic Dream*.....of him and his ***Nimue*** persona.

"You're wet, my *death's-head hawkmoth*. Was it such a good dream you were having, Anthony?" he purrs. He bends his head down between my thighs. I shoot both hands downward to cradle it with a soft, breathless whimper as I feel him licking the trail of my released cum from the inside of my left thigh, and then my right - alternating between them.

My toes curl into the mattress and I feel my body completely flush with burning heat from within. When he bites into the flesh of my thigh to mark me, I moan loudly in masochistic pleasure. I feel another pair of soft lips on my face. I open my eyes to see my beautiful Will, smiling and kissing my cheek. He kisses his way to my ear, breathing hotly into it as he kisses, licks and sucks at the shell. The overwhelming sound and feel of this, combined with the feel of Hannibal's slick tongue on my thighs and his soft grunts of pleasure, send the blood rushing to my groin as my cock stiffens. Dimly I can see Hannibal's hand on Will's lower back, stroking and caressing it. Then he suddenly flips me onto my front, raising my hips up as he gently pushes my top half down by my head onto the soft eggshell blue pillows decorated with golden, reddish-blue irises.

Lips touch the nape of my neck, kissing downwards to my tailbone, where fingers already slicked with lube feel around the rim of my puckered entrance to coat it. Tingles run up my spine at the same time that pearls of pre-cum have formed on the tip of my cock.

"Please..... I want this," I gasp out, feeling the fingers spear me straight away. I arch my back slightly, mouth agape in ecstasy. The fingers slowly slip in and out of me, prepping me for what is going to happen next.

Those fingers reach so deep within me, I nearly cum from that alone. But the fingers are soon removed and replaced with hips slamming into mine from behind, as Hannibal pulls me back onto his slicked-up cock with a lusty grunt.

"*Oh, god!!!.....Nimue, your.....Oh, oh.....I can feel your heat."*

He starts to move, jolting my body back and forth with his hips undulating into mine from behind. He keeps me in a certain position on my hands and knees, making sure each stroke of his cock hits my prostate dead-centre, sending tingles shooting up my spine. He drapes himself across my back, reaching down to grasp my aching cock in his hand, tugging and squeezing until I think I might go mad with pleasure. His other hand grabs the back of my head by my hair to wrench it upwards.

There is a large mirror above the headboard. I can see Will on his knees, pounding into him from behind, making Hannibal gasp and moan with each thrust, which in turn causes him to thrust back into me. It is so erotic, hot and desirable to see it all happening between the three

of us. I start to undulate my hips back and forth into his thrusts, not bothering to quell my cries, sighs and moans of pleasure and bliss.

Hannibal's P.O.V.

The beautifully pleasured sounds coming from Anthony's sweet lips are like a symphony of the ***Lovemaking*** between us. On his knees behind me, Will thrusts his throbbing cock in and out of my well-lubricated entrance at such a pace, it shoves my hips back into our third lover's tight, beautiful ass. I continue to manipulate Anthony's cock in my hand, spurred on by his symphony of passion.

Droplets of sweat are running down and between our bodies, coating us in a gentle sheen which glows in the soft dawn light spreading through the curtains of the sleeping cabin. At last, hungry for release but not wanting this moment to end, my muscles tense as the pressure building within me comes to a peaceful, satisfying climax. I can hear my two darling sweet angels succumb to their orgasms at the same time.

A rush of sweet warmth - Will's cum fills me completely - at the same time I fill Anthony with my own release, coating his tight insides to mark them as my own. I feel his hot seed spill onto my hand, the muscles of his lovely ass clenching around my cock, which has not yet returned to softness. Incredibly, I can feel another orgasm rising, causing me in turn to clench around Will's cock.

And so I experience another earth-shattering orgasm, my vision whiting out almost completely.

Collapsing with a muffled thump on top of the bunched-up duvet cover, I weakly pull Anthony over to lie between Will and I. I can see that he is still breathing laboriously from the most intense orgasms he has ever had - six of them - after the three of us had made love so many times to each other it had become much too intense to continue.

Reaching up with one hand, I stroke some strands of his slightly damp hair away from his eyes and gently tuck them behind his ear, kissing his forehead lovingly. He lies on his back, allowing me to rest my hand on his chest as Will does the same. His heart rate slowly returns to normal.

"I....I'm scared," Anthony breathes, gulping down saliva to get the next words out. "I'm....scared....of losing you both. When I first met you both, on separate occasions, I was conflicted regarding my feelings for the both of you. And then further on, when I fell off...that cliff, I knew that I...I loved you both *so much*, I wanted to be with you for the rest of my life! And yet, I fear..." His voice begins to break. "I fear that we're going to be separated from each other at some point - some point *soon* - and I'll never see either of you again."

Tears brim in his lovely eyes. He brings both hands up to cover his eyes as he starts to tremble, his body wracked by pitiful sobs. I rest my forehead against his, and Will does the

same. Taking hold of his left hand, I pull it gently away from his eye and entwine my fingers with his, as Will does with his right hand.

"*We won't let that happen, I promise you... and I always keep my promises, Anthony."*

"Then help me...help me do something."

"Tell us."

"Help me... get rid of my uncle. Help me...kill him."

Will's P.O.V.

Hearing Anthony say these words about his uncle makes me want to ask him what he had dreamed about. From what I had read in his file before destroying it, the man had sexually abused him for years, ever since he had come to Thassos at a very young age and right up until his sixteenth birthday. As I remembered it, everything had been detailed - the court case; the evidence dismissed because there was no proof a very prominent man - Kronos Dimmond - had done the things Anthony had told the police he had done; and the hospital records, irrefutable proof of how many times he had been taken to Accident and Emergency bruised and battered.

The excuse his uncle had given each time, when questioned by hospital staff, was simply that Anthony was "clumsy and accident-prone."

"Tell us what you dreamt of," Hannibal asks him. Anthony licks his lips and begins to tell us about his dream - the conjoined creature of Hannibal's persona ***Nimue*** and Hannibal; how he ripped apart his uncle; the way he watched his own heart being devoured as someone whispered Dante into his ear.

"I'd never felt so...aroused before," Anthony confesses to us. His hand slips down between his thighs to grasp his now hard cock, and he begins to slowly move his hand up and down while allowing Hannibal to kiss him passionately.

Feeling myself becoming excited again, I slip down between his thighs, moving his hand gently out of the way and taking hold of his cock myself. My tongue sneaks out and I flick it over the tip, hearing him give a breathless hitched gasp. With a sly smile I bend my head and swallow him down into my hot, moist mouth, wringing an ecstatic moan from his lips, Hannibal's fingers in my hair and his mouth on Anthony's neck.

"Haaa.....oh, oh.....Pearl-Lace!!!.....Nimue.....ahhh, I love you both.....Ohhhh!!!"

Location - Night-time - Kronos Dimmond's Mansion Residence

Anthony Dimmond's P.O.V.

A large, extravagant party is being held at my uncle's mansion to celebrate his election - or, more likely, his bought-and-paid-for appointment - as the Mayor of Crietos. I sit beside Hannibal in the back seat of our Uber as we wend our way to the soirée. Hannibal, in his ***Nimue*** persona, is wearing a long black one-shouldered evening dress with white and lapis lazuli roses on the neckline, curving down to embrace his hips, while lapis lazuli dewdrop earrings dangle from his ears. Around his throat is a choker bedecked with pearls - gifts from Will, which he had had made into jewelry, and to my mind make him look so achingly and hauntingly beautiful.

Underneath he is wearing a creme-white corset, thongs and tights embellished with ruffles and ribbons. I notice that for some strange, unknown reason, he is still wearing the wedding ring given to him by Coquille. Reaching for his hand, I squeeze it lightly to reassure myself and him that everything will be all right.

This makes him look down, as it is the hand with the ring I am holding, and then back up as the Uber soon enters into the large parking area, where other vehicles of the rich and even famous are parked. The Uber driver glides into the last remaining space.

Letting go of Hannibal's hand, I get out first and go around to the other side, opening the door to allow him to step out onto the gravel.

He smiles softly at me, lips outlined by golden lipstick. Slipping his hand, with its laquered-to-match gold fingernails, into the crook of my arm, we head up the flight of steps leading to the large double doors. The doors swing open to reveal my uncle, standing there in all his vileness. He grabs hold of both of my cheeks and kisses them, making it look to his guests as if he is enthusiastic about seeing his nephew again. It is all I can do to keep the bile from rising in my throat.

"Anthony, my darling, sweet nephew. Welcome," he croons. He turns to Hannibal, who gives him a coy, seductive smile. Before I can make proper introductions, my uncle takes his hand and kisses it with his lying lips.

If any of his guests knew what this man was actually like beneath his own "person suit," and how he had destroyed my childhood, his reputation would be ruined and he would be run out of town by everyone who knew him.

I dance a waltz with Hannibal in the large ballroom, while the other guests do the same or wander about sipping champagne or cocktails, chattering about nothing. I feel him rest his cheek against mine as everything seems to dissolve around us, leaving only us in the ballroom, alone. So, I muster my courage and decide to say it.

"*Nimue, there is something...I want to say to you. Even though...you still wear **his** wedding ring, I.... I want...to marry both you and Pearl-Lace, so I'll never lose either of you,*" I

whisper in his ear, quietly enough for him to hear. Everything comes back to normal as I whirl him about, smiling madly, then dip him low, making him gasp delightedly, and bring him back up. He places a hand on my chest with a trembling smile.

It is at this pristine moment that I hear a champagne glass suddenly shattering. We both turn our heads at the same time to see.....Erisa Ereshkigal.....who is staring at us, pale white and trembling, crimson lips slightly agape. My uncle quickly approaches them, leading them away and out of the ballroom. I can't help but notice that their dress and hairstyle are remarkably similar to Nimue's, but this is all forgotten as Hannibal and I gaze at one another, realizing that our hour is upon us.

The music changes and all returns to as it once was, while Hannibal and I slip out unnoticed.

Talk of marriage and wedding plans must wait for a happier time.

Now it is time to hunt, as Hannibal calls it, our ***Prey***.

The large study where my uncle works is still the same from my childhood, with the desk in front of a large, ornately curved window with a mural of a figure holding a long spear, stabbing down into a writhing serpent woman; a bookshelf with a ladder leading up to the mezzanine library above on the left-hand side of the study; and on the right, a fireplace flanked by figures of debauchery and carnage.

"Do you remember what you did to me, uncle? You *took me*.....right here in this very room, when I....I was only....a young child. ***A child!!!***" I hiss and spit at him in the dim light, while my uncle, mouth covered with duct tape, struggles weakly in the electrical cable that keeps him tightly bound to the chair behind his desk, which I lean against before him.

I hold in one hand a curved devil's claw hunting knife, gleaming in the faint desk lamp light. Behind my uncle stands Hannibal, nails painted crimson, dark eyes glowing, waiting for me to make my move. Walking slowly around the desk, I lean over Kronos Dimmond, looking down into those cold, unforgiving eyes.

"Because you took my childhood from me, I'm taking the thing that caused me pain, anguish and emotional hurt," I hear myself say in a strange, disembodied voice that doesn't even sound like mine.

The time has come. The moment is now.

I stab straight down into his groin area, dragging the knife upwards to rip his flesh apart. His eyes close but he doesn't make a sound. He seems prepared, even content, to die. I would have preferred a bit of groveling, but honestly? I just want him dead. His blood spurts outwards, covering me so thoroughly it soaks through the suit I wear. His stomach contents fall to the carpet with a sickening, muffled, squelching thump. Hannibal, breathing hard, unnecessarily pushes the desk out of the way, steps behind me and wraps his arms around me, pulling me flush against his warm chest.

"*Tell me... how do you feel right now?"* he whispers urgently in my ear, slipping one hand down between my thighs to cup the bulging erection he finds there. I whimper helplessly.

"Haaa....you already know how it makes me feel...." I reply, heady with blood lust, feeling him start to rub the palm of his hand up and down over the cloth-covered bulge, rubbing the head of my cock through layers of fabric. I can feel pre-cum starting to form at the tip, dribbling downward.

"*Tell me,"* I hear him pant.

He rests his forehead between my shoulder blades, and I soon hear a ragged sigh and wet sounds coming from behind. I manage to turn around and face him. I can see his hand moving under the now bunched-up dress as he rubs himself through the already soaked lace thongs, leaning against the desk for support.

Some of his blonde fringe mixed with silvery highlights falls in front of his eyes. Feeling more aroused than ever, I find myself peeling off the suit jacket that is completely covered in my uncle's blood, throwing it over the disgusting pig's corpse. I take hold of Hannibal, lift him up onto the desk and clamber over him as he pulls me down into a breathless kiss.

His hands grasp my back under my shoulder blades, and a guttural groan escapes me when he drags his crimson nails down it. A delicious zing of pleasurable pain shoots through my body. I hungrily bend my head, trailing my lips up and down his neck - licking, biting and sucking into the pale flesh, relishing his amber scent and his deep moans.

"*When... when we get back to the boat, I want you and Will to ravage me until I forget my own native language and everything else except the pleasure you will both give me.*" His voice is rough and strange. His scent... Amber? I don't recall Hannibal ever wearing amber.

The fog that had settled over my brain, the result of my adrenaline-fueled "killer's high," is beginning to lift. At their mention of returning to the boat, I flash on Hannibal and I on the boat that afternoon, getting dressed and ready for the party. Will and I had tended to ***Nimue*** like the queen they are. I had zipped up their dress and adjusted the pearl choker - *the choker isn't there!! where is it??* - while Will applied lacquer to their nails. Gold lacquer, to match their lipstick.

Gold lacquer. This person's nails are *crimson.* ***Deep, blood red.***

I suddenly wrench free from them, this "Not-***Nimue." Who is this??***

I grab the knife at the same time they try to reach for an ornate letter opener with an orange snake-eye stone on the handle. A crimson haze covers my vision, filling it completely.

What transpires next, I cannot explain how it happens.

It just does.

Chapter End Notes

English translation of the section of Dante's poem *La Vita Nuova* (The New Life) that Anthony hears in his dream:

Joyous Love seemed to me, the while he held
My heart within his hands, and in his arms
My lady lay asleep wrapped in a veil.
He woke her then and trembling and obedient
She ate that burning heart out of his hand;
Weeping I saw him then depart from me.

Those Gruesome Cells They Are Open

Chapter by TheWitchofStJohns

Chapter Summary

Those gruesome cells they are open
We will leave those days behind
You have no hold of the fears
You created deep inside,
Your doors have closed for the last time
Freedom is there and we move on
Far away from your prison bars.

- Christopher Victor Russon, from *Broken Chains*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal's P.O.V.

I am standing on the secluded beach of a nearby cove, holding some fresh clean clothes and a new pair of sneakers in a bag, with Will standing beside me. Both of us watch quietly as Anthony gingerly peels off the completely blood-soaked suit he had worn to his uncle's spectacular party to celebrate his becoming the Mayor of Crietos. Only now the man is dead, along with the manipulative Erisa Ereshkigal, who turned out to be *Matthew Brown*, of all people. He had desired Anthony and Will for himself, and that desire cost him his life and the life of the hit man he had sent after me in Florence.

Doing our best to follow Kronos Dimmond after he had unceremoniously ejected Erisa from the house, I had become separated from Anthony and found myself waylaid and surrounded by a small mob of rude, irritating guests. They demanded to know who I was and why I had accompanied Anthony to the party. All of them gained immediate places of honor in my Rolodex as I fielded their intrusive inquiries with, I must admit, admirable aplomb, all things considered. It was during this time that Erisa must have managed to sneak back into the building. Anthony had gone on ahead of me, and I imagine Erisa had just followed the shouting, found him in his uncle's study, and assisted him in subduing Kronos and tying him up. Anthony, addled and upset, no doubt had little trouble believing Erisa was me in the room's very dim lighting. Indeed, it seemed likely they had planned it that way, what with their attempt to look as much like me as possible.

The ruse was going well until my dear boy began to notice subtle differences between Erisa and myself, the differing nail lacquer colors being the final nail in the coffin, so to speak. I had at last managed to escape the guests from hell and ran down the hallway, stopping at a closed door with faint light from within showing through the bottom gap. I tested the doorknob, found it locked, backed away several paces, gathered my strength, then ran and threw my shoulder against the door with all my might. The door burst open with a crash. I immediately saw Kronos Dimmond, tied to a chair and disemboweled, rivers of thick red blood and several internal organs soaking through the expensive carpet. A mere second passed before I saw Matthew Brown attacking Anthony on the desk, nearly stabbing an ornate letter opener into his chest. Without thinking I bounded to the desk, grabbed the letter opener from his hand, seized the young man's head by his hair, wrenched it backwards to expose his throat, then sliced across it with the letter opener. A hot torrent of crimson came gushing out, covering Anthony completely, while some of it soaked permanently into the odious carpet.

Will had followed us to the mansion in another car, hiding on the grounds and sneaking in at the same time Erisa did, unseen by them. I now recall the ***Tableau*** I had made of Kronos Dimmond and Matthew Brown, with both Will's and Anthony's help.

"The Lovers Tearing Each Other Apart in Jealousy and Envy," based on a painting by the renowned Baltimore artist Mrs. Arianna Dragnas, a native of Crietos. I had known her also to be a retired serial killer who lived in Wolf Trap - almost Will's neighbor, in fact - as Mrs. Miggins, settling there after dispatching her last victim, a loathsome man who had violated and abused seventeen young girls under the orders of none other than Kronos Dimmond. I think the dear lady would have been utterly delighted with the irony of the situation.

All three of us would be long gone by the time the Greek police had worked out that it was ***Il Mostro di Firenze*** who had done the ***Tableau***, with two new killers they had yet to identify.

"*Nimue*?" Anthony shouts, naked as the day he was born, arms wrapped around himself, shivering in the chilled morning air. Drawn thusly from my thoughts, I walk up to him, holding out the bag containing the clean clothes and sneakers Will had brought for him. Having already flung the knife into the ocean, Will is standing over a nearby burn barrel, incinerating Anthony's bloodied clothing. He pokes at them occasionally with a long piece of driftwood as black smoke rises into the air.

Anthony turns to face me, still keeping his arms crossed over his fine muscular chest covered in crimson petals, and steps closer to me. He smiles and takes the garments, dressing quickly. When he is clothed and shod, he turns to me again, reaching up with one hand to stroke a strand of hair from my forehead. He gently tucks it behind my ear, exposing the glittering lapis lazuli earring in the light of the rising sun that peeks over the edge of the horizon. We gaze at one another rather wistfully.

I begin to say something when excited barking makes us turn to see Winston - Will's mongrel retriever - bounding towards us across the length of the beach. I walk towards him, intent on

catching him, but he seizes the hem of my dress in his teeth and begins to tug and drag me in the direction he had come from. He is clearly attempting to lead me somewhere.

It all ends without warning when he gives a pained yelp as something strikes his hip.

I quickly reach out and pull what appears to be a tranquilizer dart from his side. All at once I hear Will and Anthony shouting "*NIMUE!!!"* I turn toward them when suddenly the sand explodes behind me, revealing a person who tries to lunge at me.

I manage to throw sand in their eyes, causing them to cry out in shock and anger. Grabbing the knife hidden within my tights, I slash their throat hard, severing the arteries neatly. Blood gushes out as their body falls backward onto the sand with a muffled thud.

I fall to my knees beside Winston, checking to see if he is all right. Thankfully, he is only unconscious from the effects of the tranquilizer dart. Feeling my inner ***Predator*** rising, I get to my feet and stalk toward the group of men attacking Will and Anthony, bloodied knife in hand.

Anthony Dimmond's P.O.V:

I can't remember what had happened next.

When I finally come around, my entire body aches as if I've been repeatedly kicked, punched and battered by the group of hired thugs who attacked us. An attempt to move my wrists reveals handcuffs locked around them. A chain is attached to one of them, and that chain in turn is attached to two handcuffs around my ankles. The entire arrangement leads to a large chain attached to a yacht's hold wall. There is also a collar around my neck, connected to the same large chain.

Weakly, I manage to sit up and lean against some sacks for ballast, feeling every inch of my body screaming at me not to move. Yet I must move, for something is telling me that the ***Snake*** is here. The hold door bolt is pulled back and the iron door slides open, as I warily turn my head to look at who is coming in. I am dismayed to discover that my instinct was correct.

Augustuv-Magnus Coquille, his rich dark blue shirt sleeves rolled up, wearing a black cravat with a fiery opal tie pin and white trousers, steps in and slides the door closed behind him. He walks over and picks up a plain wooden chair. Placing it down in front of me, he sits and crosses one leg over the other, clasping his hands together on top of his knee. He gazes down at me through his ever-present pince-nez. His smile is sardonic.

"You are probably wondering how I discovered where you were hiding, Anthony. Do you want me to tell you?" he smirks. I spit heavily in his face, seeing it land on his cheek to my great satisfaction. He brings a handkerchief out of his breast pocket and calmly wipes the spittle away. He gets up, tucking the handkerchief back in place.

Suddenly he grabs hold of me by the chains, a harsh metallic clinking sound echoing in the hold. He pulls my face close to his, and I stare into his cold, dark serpentine eyes. Without warning he punches straight into my stomach with a clenched fist, knocking the breath from my lungs. I hunch over his arm, feeling blood drip from my mouth and spatter onto the hold floor.

He moves his clenched fist away, grasping my chin and forcing it upward. I spit a mouthful of blood at his face and glare at him, watching his eyes narrow as he manages to jerk his head aside just in time to avoid it. Breathing heavily, I wait for the next blow. It comes hard, followed by many more. My vision nearly blacks out with each punch and kick he rains down upon my body.

Collapsing to the hold floor, I weakly cough blood onto the floor in spreading crimson petals, my body completely wrecked. Coquille looks down at me, breathing heavily, the skin of his fists and knuckles split, covered with my blood and his own. He wrenches my head up by my hair and I let out a pained, labored gasp.

"The Florence police and the FBI had the body buried in your grave exhumed! Did you know that?" he hisses, panting and breathless. "What a shocking surprise - *it wasn't you!*" He shakes my head roughly, pulling on my hair and rattling the bones in my neck. "You...will *never* see Nimue ever again. Do you understand, Anthony? I....will *not* be so lenient the next time you try to get back the one you allegedly 'love'. Nimue belongs to *me* and *only me,*" he spits out. I glare balefully at him as I bare my teeth. If not for these chains, I would rip his throat out and sever his life.

"Nimue is *not yours*. They will *never* be yours, Coquille. Nimue will make sure you know it," I snarl. I brace myself for the blow. His clenched, bloody fist punches me in the face, and blackness sweeps in to cover my vision.

Hannibal's P.O.V.

The sound of a tap running, followed by a slight hiss of pain coming from someone unknown, makes me flutter my eyes open to reveal a blurred vision of a sleeping cabin. I slowly sit up, wincing with the woozy pain of whatever had been used to knock me out during the attack of the hired thugs.

My vision begins to return to normal, and the pain eases slightly. I slip off the bed and walk unsteadily forward, still holding my head with both hands. Augustuv-Magnus comes out of the bathroom, wiping the blood - his or someone else's? - from his knuckles with a cloth.

I lower my hands and approach him warily. I look straight down at his split, bloodied knuckles and feel the rage rising. *So much rage*. I roughly grab the collar of his unbuttoned shirt. He flicks his gaze down and back up to me, pretending to be affronted at my audacity in daring to touch him.

"***What...have you done... with them!!!?*** " I roar, shaking him to emphasize my words."***TELL ME WHAT YOU'VE DONE WITH ANTHONY AND...***" I somehow manage to stop myself from saying Will's name aloud, which he notices when I abruptly stop shouting and press my lips tightly together, not wishing to reveal my third lover's name.

I turn swiftly and run for the door, but I do not get far. He grabs me around the waist and I thrash weakly in his grip, the tranquilizer still in my system.

Slumping in his arms, I cannot help but allow him to pull me away from the sleeping cabin door and over to the bed. He pushes me down and I turn my face to one side, staring blankly at the wallpaper adorned with faint patterns of Sweet Williams. He takes hold of my arm, injecting a sedative into the crook of my elbow. I am unable to silence a piteous whimper.

"Shhhh....it's all right....this is only to help you *relax*, sweet Nimue, my darling," Coquille croons. "And as for your third lover...Will Graham, or ***Pearl-Lace*** , should I say? Well, Mr. Mason Verger is *very* pleased to have him back in his - *care*."

"You...*bastard!! ...Neršia velnio!!* "

I hear myself beginning to speak in my native language as I attempt to sit up, only to feel the effects of the sedative kicking in fast. Swaying back and forth, I try to keep my eyes open, but the sedative is more powerful than my own body. I emit a soft, weak moan as I fall into his chest.

His hands take hold of me, pushing me back down onto the bed. Peering upward through a drugged haze, my swimming vision sees his face turn into that of a large snake's - eyes glinting with evil malice. My eyes slide shut, allowing the blackness to descend.

I remember nothing thereafter.

Nothing at all.

Only my desperate, aching worry for my loves - Anthony and Will.

<u>Will's P.O.V.</u>

Mason Verger - the vile, loathsome pig of a brother to sweet Margot Verger - is like a giddy schoolboy who just got their favourite treat as he flings me down onto the king-size bed. I land with a muffled thump, my hands cuffed before me, a leather choker with attached leash around my neck. The final insult? A clear plastic restraint mask covers my nose and mouth.

The same mask I had been forced to wear by Frederick Chilton during my imprisonment at the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. I had been convicted of the murder of Abigail Hobbs (who I discovered later was still very much alive) as well as three previously unsolved murders - those of Cassie Boyle, Marissa Schur and Nicholas Boyle. Hannibal had assisted me in proving my innocence and securing my release. All I will say about that is that it was very complicated.

"You know, my darling ***Pearl-Lace,*** sometimes you have to muzzle a *bitch* if they get out of hand. And you...have been such a *bad bitch,*" he hisses, yanking the leash to pull me up onto my knees. Snarling, I lunge my cuffed hands at his eyes, digging my nails down into them. Hard.

He curses in shock, horror and agony, wrenching free from me and covering his eyes with his hands. Crimson begins to trickle down his cheeks in thick rivulets. Turning my wrist just right and slipping one hand out of the handcuffs, I slide off the bed and saunter over to the squealing pig of a man who is writhing on the carpet

Grabbing the back of his head by his hair, I wrench it backward. Placing my lips against his ear and smirking a manic joker's grin, I whisper the words into it in my ***Pearl-Lace voice.***

"*Then maybe, because...I'm such a* ***bitch.....****I should teach you what happens when....you muzzle the* ***bitch,*** *dear Mason."*

<u>Anthony Dimmond's P.O.V.</u>

The tinkling sound of something landing on the hold floor has me weakly fluttering my eyes open. I have finally come around from being knocked out by Coquille. I can see a skeleton key lying just a few feet in front of me.

A key that most definitely is for the cuffs around my wrists and ankles, and the collar around my neck. I pray that this isn't some kind of test by that horrid snake of a man to see if I would go looking for Nimue. I take a deep breath and, willing my heart to cease its frantic pounding, shift myself to reach for it.

My battered body screams in protest, but I grit my teeth and slowly reach for the key, straining and sweating with the pain. Somehow I manage to grasp it. Gripping it as tightly as I can, I drag it towards me and set about releasing myself from my prison of chains.

I will not be trapped this way, while Coquille has the person I love in his vile clutches.

I will not.

Chapter End Notes

Neršia velnio - Lithuanian for "spawn of the devil"

Nothing More Than a Ghost Within a Ghost

Chapter by TheWitchofStJohns

Chapter Summary

> “I was set free! I dissolved in the sea, became white sails and flying spray, became beauty and rhythm, became moonlight and the ship and the high dim-starred sky! I belonged, without past or future, within peace and unity and a wild joy, within something greater than my own life, or the life of Man, to Life itself!"
>
> - Eugene O'Neill, from *Long Day's Journey Into Night*
> (the title of this chapter is also from O'Neill's play)

ANTHONY DIMMOND'S P.O.V.

My fingers are aching and bloody, but the skeleton key works like a charm. A few minutes' struggle and I am free of my chains. With a silent prayer of gratitude to whatever god or gods may exist, I slowly begin to rise, wincing with the sharp pain that now seems to be a permanent resident in my battered body. At last I stagger to my feet and stretch my weary limbs upward, loosening the aching muscles and getting my blood pumping again. I have to find a way out of here. I have to find a way to subdue Coquille and get Hannibal and myself out of this place. I know he is here, imprisoned by Coquille just as I am. I can feel his presence. I close my eyes and send him a fervent, unspoken message.

"Hang on, my darling Nimue. Wait for me. I am coming for you. We will escape from here. Wait for me. I love you."

With a renewed feeling of gathering strength, I inspect my surroundings. I know I am on Coquille's yacht, but I have absolutely no idea where we are. There must be a lifeboat... If I can incapacitate Coquille somehow (I don't want to kill him; he must be brought to justice), find and rescue Hannibal, we can commandeer the lifeboat and escape to whatever shore lies beyond.

There are boxes stacked all around the hold. I inspect several of them, but they are mostly supplies of food and drink, nothing that can be used to engineer an escape. I realize, however, that I am absolutely parched and starving. I discover some packages of precooked bratwurst and some bottled water, and dig into them hungrily. I have been fed very little since my capture, and I must continue to regain strength. A mere sausage has never tasted so delicious, and I gulp down two bottles of water in quick succession. Even lukewarm, to me it tastes like

the finest wine. I wish there was a way to take some food with us for the journey, but I think it wise to remain as unencumbered as possible.

I am washing down the last of the bratwurst with a third bottle of water when I hear the scrape of the iron bolt across the hold door. I quickly toss the remains of my meal into a corner, grab one of the heavy chains that had imprisoned me, and hide behind a steel girder. The door slides open with a groan, and Coquille steps into the room. He saunters in, arrogant as always, no doubt prepared to continue his routine of smug taunts and brutal beatings. He is several steps in when he spins around on his heel to confront me. But his smirk disappears when he sees that I am no longer there. I press myself against the girder, waiting for an opportunity to strike. When he turns away, frantically looking about the hold, I run from my hiding place and throw the chain tight around his neck from behind.

A struggle begins as he attempts to wrench the chain from my hands. "Dimmond!" he gasps. "Stop this foolishness! You will not succeed!" Glancing quickly behind me, I see that he has left the door open. Blessing my luck, I drag him towards it, maintaining and tightening my hold on the chain. He continues to fight me as I pull him over the threshold. His face is turning red and his eyes are beginning to roll back in his head. I release the chain from his neck and land several strong kicks to his solar plexus. He slumps to the floor, panting and gasping for air. I double up the length of chain in my hand and strike his head with it. One, two, three, four times. He drops completely, eyes closed. I wait a seemingly interminable amount of time to ensure that he has lost consciousness. When it appears that he has, I look around to orient myself and see a set of stairs leading to the upper levels. I have bought myself a few minutes of time, at the very least. With a last glance at Coquille's supine form, I bound up the stairs, shouting all the way.

"NIMUE! HANNIBAL! WHERE ARE YOU? IT'S ANTHONY! ANSWER ME, MY LOVE! WHERE ARE YOU??"

<u>HANNIBAL'S P.O.V.</u>

Someone... someone is calling my name... Am I dreaming?

I do not know how long I have been unconscious. I slowly open my eyes, my eyelids feeling as though they are weighted down with lead. I raise myself to a sitting position on the bed, still feeling woozy from the sedative. I had the strangest dream. I thought I had heard someone calling my name...

"HANNIBAL! WHERE ARE YOU? IT'S ANTHONY! WE MUST GET OUT OF HERE! ANSWER ME, DARLING!"

It - it can't be... Anthony?!

With a jolt of adrenaline, I am suddenly wide awake. I leap from the bed and wrench open the door of the sleeping cabin. Anthony has run past my door in his desperate search for me.

"Anthony!!" I cry, bursting into tears.

At the sound of my voice he turns, eyes wide and gasping, and runs back down the hallway. We throw our arms around each other, crying and laughing all at once. Frantic kisses and happy tears.

"Oh my God, Nimue! You're here! You're alive!" He holds my face in his hands, looking at me with such relief and love. I nod, wiping my tears away and smiling. I cannot speak, I am so relieved to see him. We hold each other tight, not wanting this moment to end. But it must.

Anthony holds me at arms' length with a tense, worried look on his beautiful face. "Coquille is unconscious, but I fear not for long. We must find the lifeboat and leave here at once. Do you feel able to travel?"

"I think so," I reply. "He has drugged me repeatedly, but I'll be all right. It doesn't matter anyway. I would move the mountains of Hell to leave this place, and now that you are here..."

*"Now that **you** are here, dear, **sweet** Anthony, everything is going to be all right,"* a loud voice behind us proclaims mockingly.

Coquille. We both turn wearily to see him leaning against the doorway, smiling. He is bleeding profusely from several gaping wounds on his face and forehead, and there are purple bruises around his neck. But there he stands, wavering slightly, a large, heavy hunting knife in his hand.

"So you two are just going to run off into the night together and live happily ever after, is that it?" he asks, touching the tip of the knife absently to the pad of his index finger. He turns his sardonic gaze to Anthony. "Anthony, are you sure you want to waste the rest of your life on a man like Hannibal? After what he did?" He takes several steps forward, and I curse my luck that I no longer have my knife. Anthony stands beside me, still as granite, his hands tightened into fists, his steely gaze boring a hole in Coquille's head.

"What do you mean, 'after what he did'?" His voice is slow, and steady, and hard.

A wicked grin splits Coquille's battered face. "You don't know what Hannibal did? What he did to my father?" He takes one more step forward and the grin vanishes. His face is devoid of any emotion, and his voice is lifeless.

*"What he did to **our** father?"*

ANTHONY DIMMOND'S P.O.V.

Without warning, the world simply freezes. The blood freezes in my veins. My heart stops, my breathing stops. Nothing exists except the words Coquille has just spoken. They too are frozen in the air between us.

"*Our* father? W-what... I - I don't..." I cannot comprehend what he is telling me. It can't be true. *It can't.*

Coquille nods, and I cannot tell if the sympathetic expression on his face is genuine or mocking. "Yes, Anthony. It's true. My father was your father too. After my mother died, he married your mother. You were born several years later. But I never got a chance to know you, because our father -" His voice remains calm, but he turns his eyes to Hannibal, and his gaze gradually grows cold. "Our father, Vladimir Grutas, was murdered. By Hannibal. It was a revenge killing, you see. I really don't..." His voice trails off, and his eyes wander about the room. "I have neither the time nor the inclination to go into the details at the moment. Suffice to say that Hannibal murdered our father. Your mother took you to Greece to be near her family. You were... you were just a baby." His voice has become soft and wondering. "When you were about six years old, your mother died of a broken heart. She never got over the murder of our father. She loved him very much, you see..."

Again he pauses, seemingly overtaken by memories. I steal a glance at Hannibal. He stands stoically, not moving a muscle, staring straight ahead. I feel so many feelings at once.

Coquille shakes his head as he comes out of his thoughts. "That was when you were turned over to be raised by her brother Kronos, your uncle. I kept fairly close tabs on you over the years, but I never saw you again. Until now."

An uncomfortable silence falls heavily over the room. I stand staring down at the knife still in Coquille's hand. I feel numb. Hannibal attempts to speak to me, but I hold my hand up. There is too much to process at the moment. I know that Coquille revealed this to me to dissuade me from escaping with Hannibal, but in spite of everything, that is my first and only priority. I raise my head and look into Hannibal's eyes. There is fear there, and regret, and love. It is the love that I choose to hold onto.

I seize his hand firmly. "Come on, my love. We're getting out of here."

HANNIBAL'S P.O.V.

We try to push past Coquille but he blocks the doorway, brandishing the knife. His sardonic wit has returned. "I've enjoyed our sentimental reunion, dear brother, but Nimue stays right where she is. Don't even *try* to take her from me, I've told you this. She is my *wife*. She is *mine*."

"Nimue belongs to no one but *herself!*" Anthony snaps. "She doesn't love you. She doesn't want to be with you. Am I wrong, Nimue?"

I squeeze his hand tight and train my intense gaze upon Coquille. My voice is firm. "No, Anthony. You are correct. I love you, and Will. You are half of my life, and Will is the other half. I want nothing more than to spend the rest of my days with both of you."

Coquille sees red. His chest heaves, his eyes are aflame and his body quivers with rage. Before either of us knows what is happening, he grabs Anthony by the throat and slams him back into the wall of the sleeping cabin.

"THEN SAY GOODBYE TO HALF OF YOUR LIFE, NIMUE!!"

My mind shuts off but my body propels me forward, as if in slow motion. My fist flies toward Coquille's head, but I am still weak from the drugs. It is too late. The knife plunges into Anthony's rib cage, frighteningly near his heart.

"NO! NO! AUGUSTUV, NO! STOP! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE? AUGUSTUV, WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?!"

I want to move, but I cannot. I want to kill Coquille, but I cannot. I cannot move. I cannot think. I cannot breathe. All I can do is scream.

Anthony stares at Coquille in horror, blood filling his mouth as he chokes and spits. One wavering hand clamps down on Coquille's shoulder. Anthony's lips move as if he is trying to form words. He is trying to tell Coquille something. Coquille merely stares at him, no emotion visible on his face. His hand remains wrapped around Anthony's gasping throat. The other hand remains on the knife still in Anthony's chest as blood pours over it. It is no longer made of "crimson petals" now. It is simply blood.

Anthony turns his eyes to me. There is still so much love in them. And fear. And regret. But mostly love. I send him love through my tears in return, even though I feel as though my own life is ending.

His eyes close, and he slumps down against the wall. Suddenly Coquille jolts back to life, as if he has absorbed the life energy now draining slowly from Anthony's body.

"Ohh no you don't!" he shouts in a grotesquely cheerful way. He yanks the knife from Anthony's chest and glibly tosses it aside, more blood gushing from the wound. He bends down and gleefully hauls Anthony's body over his shoulder, as if he were nothing more than a sack of flour. "Off we go, young man!" he cries as he strides down the hall and up the steps to the deck.

At last my feet begin to move again. All I can do is stumble after them. "Augustuv? What is going on? What are you doing??"

I stop and stare in horror as I reach the deck. Coquille is standing near the railing, Anthony still hanging limply from his shoulder. Cold, nauseous dread grips my heart as I begin to understand his intentions. An icy wind chills the night air; we must be very far north.

"Why, I'm simply sending my dear little brother off on his final journey! It's the least he deserves," he says cheerfully.

"Augustuv, no, please, don't do this, he needs a doctor, we should take him to a hospital -"

"Do you want to say goodbye, Nimue? No? Well, I'll say goodbye for us both then, shall I?" He brings Anthony down and cradles him like a child. I begin to sob desperately. "My dear, darling wife Nimue and I wish you a safe journey, Anthony. I do wish we had had more time together. Goodbye!"

"NO, AUGUSTUV, NO!!"

And he flings Anthony's body over the railing and into the cold dark sea. And as the sea claims Anthony, so darkness claims me as I lose consciousness.

AN UNKNOWN POINT IN THE FUTURE

ANTHONY DIMMOND'S P.O.V.

It is dark... so very dark... and cold...

The last thing I remember is... what? I'm not sure. Something about a boat, a very large boat. And pain. I was in a great deal of pain. That is all I can remember.

I am lying on my back, on something gritty and wet. I turn my head and move my eyes. I think I am on a beach, lying on wet sand. I try to sit up to get a better look, but a sharp pain on the left side of my chest stops me. Grimacing, I lift my ragged shirt and see a large wound in my lower chest and rib cage. How did that happen? The edges have turned white, like I had been in the cold water for a while. Quite a long while, I imagine. There is no more blood coming from it, but it still hurts. I sigh and lower my shirt. I'm cold, wet and very hungry. I have no idea where I am.

I raise my head and look straight up into two pair of blue eyes, staring at me like I had dropped from the moon. Well, maybe I did. The eyes belong to two small blonde boys in striped shirts and shorts, carrying a basket full of shells between them. They continue to stare at me curiously, and I stare curiously back at them. Finally, what looks to be the older boy pipes up and says, "*Hvað heitir þú, herra?*" ("What is your name, mister?")

I think for a moment. Hmm. Icelandic? I think so. I know a little (and am surprised I remember that), so I'll give it a try. "*Ég veit ekki. Er þetta Ísland?*" ("I don't know. Is this Iceland?")

"*Já*," replies the boy. His brow knits in consternation. "*Þú þekkir ekki nafnið þitt eða hvar þú komst frá?*" ("You don't know your name or where you came from?")

"*Nei*," I reply sadly. "*Allt sem ég veit er að ég er mjög svöng*." ("All I know is that I'm very hungry.")

The boy reaches out and takes my hand, and both boys help me to stand and brush the sand from my clothes. "*Komdu með okkur*," the older boy says. "*Við munum fá þér eitthvað að borða. Og kannski sumir hreinar föt líka*," he adds with a smile. ("Come with us. We'll get you something to eat. And maybe some clean clothes too.")

Each boy takes one of my hands, and I walk off the beach with them and into a new life. I only wish I could remember the old one.

To Battle Tygers Move

Chapter by TheWitchofStJohns

Chapter Summary

> The Stallion snuffs the well-known Scent afar;
> And snorts and trembles for the distant Mare:
> Nor bitts nor Bridles, can his rage restrain;
> And rugged Rocks are interpos'd in vain.
>
> - Virgil, from *Georgics, III*, translated by John Dryden
> (the title of this chapter is also from this poem)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

HANNIBAL'S P.O.V.

"Hang on, my darling Nimue. Wait for me. I am coming for you. We will escape from here. Wait for me. I love you."

I slowly open my eyes to realize I have been stripped of my clothing, except for my boxers, and tucked into our bed in the sleeping cabin. Coquille lies beside me, snoring softly. I lay staring at the ceiling, wondering how much time has passed and what is coming next. My eyelids are heavy; he must have drugged me again. My sleep had been plagued by nightmares of Anthony's last moments - Coquille plunging the knife into his chest; the look of sorrowful love we had exchanged before he lost consciousness; Coquille gleefully tossing his limp body overboard. Now my Anthony is lost, and the whereabouts of my Will are uncertain. Fate has deigned to deal me the cruelest hand.

But I will not accept this fate. ***I will not.***

The intercom on Coquille's bedside table suddenly buzzes, startling him out of his sleep. With an annoyed groan he leans over and punches the button. "Yes? What is it?" he growls.

It is the yacht's captain, Mr. Agoglia, sounding alarmed. "Sir. We have just received a communication from the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation." I instantly become alert and turn my head to look at Coquille. "They are demanding that we dock at the nearest sea port and prepare to be boarded."

"WHAT?!" shouts Coquille. "Who exactly was this communication from?"

"Agent Jack Crawford," replies Mr. Agoglia. "Something about a - a kidnapping, sir."

Coquille releases the button and turns to me, fuming. We stare at one another for a moment. Then he turns back to the intercom and punches the button again. "Very well. What is the closest port?"

"Stavanger, Norway, sir."

"All right. Inform Agent Crawford and make the preparations. I'll be heading up there in a moment." Coquille releases the button, jumps up and begins dressing quickly.

"You are *not* to move from this room. Do you understand me? I will be locking the door from the outside. You *will not* be leaving this room for the foreseeable future," he snarls as he yanks on his clothes and shoes. "There are some clothes for you in the closet. You may get dressed, but I repeat, you are not to leave this room."

I narrow my eyes at him. "How did Crawford and the FBI get involved in this?" I ask warily.

"That is none of your concern," he snaps. Now fully dressed, he removes the cabin key from his trouser pocket and dangles it tauntingly before me. "And be quiet as well. Not a sound from you, do you hear?"

I nod curtly and watch as he storms out of the room and slams the door. I hear the key turn in the lock, then his footsteps as he hurries away to the captain's deck.

I dress in the shirt and slacks Coquille has provided for me, then begin pacing the room. I must both help to clear the drugs from my system, and think of a way out of this. I am going on the assumption that Anthony and I were the ones who were kidnapped. Coquille has obviously locked me in here to keep me from Jack. But if I can somehow find a way to get to him... I run my fingers through my hair with a sigh. That doesn't seem likely. The only ways out of this room are through the door, or through one of the porthole windows - and that will only end with me drowning in the frigid waters of the North Sea. There must be another way...

I begin to inspect every nook and cranny of the sleeping cabin, looking for a weapon, or at the very least something that could be used as a weapon. I rummage through drawers, sweep over shelves, ransack the closet, look under the bed, the mattress, and even under the carpeting - nothing. Frustrated, I sit down on Coquille's side of the bed, pondering. It is then that I notice something I missed - the drawers of his bedside table. Could it possibly be that simple?

I lean over and open the first of three drawers. Nothing but papers. The second drawer - the same.

I open the third drawer. It is there, nestled among even more papers.

A gun.

I truly dislike guns. They require no finesse, no imagination, and they are so very impersonal. There is no intimacy involved in the average gun kill. You simply point it at your target and pull the trigger. An idiot's weapon, I often call them. I have never used one on my hunts, and I never will. But this is not a hunt. This is self-preservation. I am desperate. And as the old canard goes, desperate times call for desperate measures.

I pick up the gun from the drawer and examine it. Thankfully it is loaded. It is then that I know for certain what must be done. I know what will end this nightmare, once and for all.

Coquille must die. I must kill him. And I will thoroughly enjoy myself doing it. After all - it's the least he deserves.

When Coquille returns some twenty minutes later, I am sitting on the bed propped up against the headboard, legs stretched out, ankles crossed. I am perusing a book, presenting the perfect picture of calm and contentment. The gun is tucked under a pillow close to hand, ready and waiting for its moment.

He is flustered but not overly so. "Well, Crawford and his agents are on board and are searching the decks. This is quite a large vessel so I am sure they will be here for some time. I just wish they would get on with it so we can head back to Italy in peace."

I put down the book, smile sweetly and ease my hand toward the pillow. "I must say it will be so nice to see Jack again. It's been far too long since I've had the pleasure."

He barks a spiteful laugh. "I told you, my dear, you will not -"

He turns just in time to see me jump from the bed and stand, the gun pointed directly at his face. "What was that, Augustuv? I will not what?" I purr.

The rage that twists his features would truly frighten a lesser man. "*That is not happening, Hannibal*," he hisses. "*Give me that gun **now**!*" He leaps toward me and grabs my wrist before I can pull the trigger.

We struggle mightily, fury overtaking us both.

And then - a shot.

Jack Crawford, determinedly striding down the hallway, knocking on and then opening any door he can see, hears a gunshot ring out from behind a door several yards down. His head snaps up, and he withdraws his gun and runs down the hall. Before he can reach the door,

however, Coquille stumbles out of it, covered in blood. He shuts the door behind him and holds up his hand to stop Jack from entering.

"Coquille! What's happened? Are you injured? Let me in there," Jack exclaims, gun at the ready.

"No, no, Agent Crawford. I beg you, no," Coquille breathes, out of breath and looking sorrowful. "I am not injured, but I must insist you remain here. What lies behind that door is too awful a sight."

"Coquille, what is going on? What happened, you must tell me!" demands Jack.

Coquille sighs deeply. "It is my wife, Nimue. She had been depressed this entire voyage and for many months before. When I returned to our room, I found her with my gun. She threatened to kill herself. We struggled, but she got away from me and - and - oh God. She put the barrel of the gun in her mouth and pulled the trigger. She is dead," he intones, hanging his head down mournfully.

"Oh, my God. Coquille, I am so sorry," replies Jack, but the wheels are turning in his head. "I understand how you feel, but this must be investigated. Do you promise me to inform the authorities here in Stavanger of her death? I can contact them myself if you'd rather -"

"No, no, that is very kind of you, Agent Crawford, but I will handle it myself," insists Coquille, wiping his bloodied brow with a handkerchief.

"Well, if you're sure," Jack says hesitantly, replacing his gun in its holster.

"I am, sir, thank you. Oh, by the way, have you and your agents had any luck in your search?" inquires Coquille, avoiding Jack's gaze.

"No, nothing so far. Everyone we've encountered are members of your staff and have every right to be here," replies Jack. "We will continue until the entire ship has been searched, but it would appear we've been on a wild goose chase," he adds apologetically.

"Well, I do appreciate your concern. The thought that Dimmond may have secreted your agents aboard my own vessel is quite disconcerting," Coquille says with another heavy sigh. "Now, if you will excuse me, I - I must attend to my dear wife."

"Of course. Please contact me if I can help you in any way," says Jack, starting to head back down the hallway.

"I will, Agent Crawford. Thank you so very much." Coquille turns and waits until Jack is out of sight. The mournful look disappears, replaced by stern determination. He opens the door and re-enters the sleeping cabin.

HANNIBAL'S P.O.V.

I am lying on the floor of the cabin, bruised and battered. A solitary tear runs down my cheek. I have failed. I realize now that my life as I knew it is essentially over.

As Coquille opens the door, a beam of moonlight streams in. It is my only connection to the outside world, and I cherish it for the brief moment it washes over me. But it is soon gone when he closes the door firmly behind him. He walks slowly over to me and looks down at my defeated form. I look up at him, my eyes cold and lifeless.

"Your body, mind, heart and soul are mine. No one else's. Do you understand, my darling, sweet Nimue?" he asks, his voice low and even.

The snake has won this game. There is no denying it. My voice breaks as I answer him. "Yes."

"Good," he intones. "I will leave you to contemplate that."

He turns smartly on his heel, opens the door and leaves the cabin. When the door is closed, I once again hear the key turning in the lock. I am left alone in the dark. I drag myself over to the bed and crawl onto it, curling myself into myself.

"Anthony... Will... Abigail..." I whisper. I can hold back the tears no longer. I lie there, weeping heavily, with nothing to comfort me but myself.

Chapter End Notes

And so our second tale ends. Stay tuned for the third and final work in this series! Thank you so much for reading! Your kudos and comments are our life's blood!

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